NEW

INSIDE THE MOST EPIC GENRE IN VIDEOGAMING

The RPG Book

From The Makers Of retro GAMER

FINAL FANTASY
Why Square Enix's grand series continues to prove itself over 35 years on

WORLD OF WARCRAFT
The story of Blizzard's world-conquering multiplayer juggernaut

DRAGON QUEST
Yuji Horii on the success of his epic JRPG monster

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How Nintendo's Pocket Monsters took over the world

THE ELDER SCROLLS
Explore the history of Tamriel, from Arena to Skyrim and beyond

SUPER NINTENDO RPGS
Delve into the best adventures available on this 16-bit powerhouse

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FUTURE

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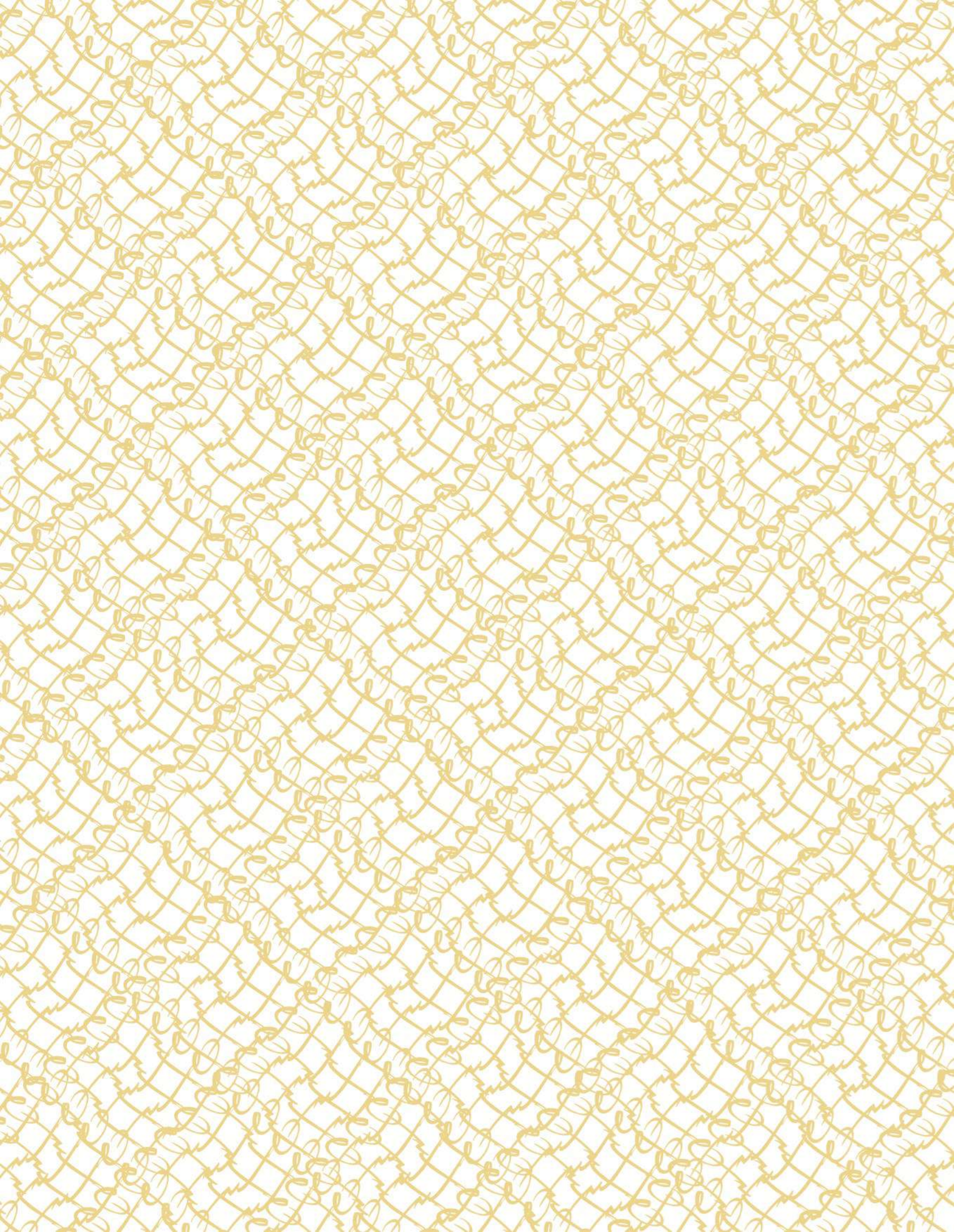

Welcome to The RPG Book

Playing a videogame is like leaping through a portal to another world. Inside these fanciful lands, we become heroes, intrepid plumbers, monster-tamers or perhaps even a simple white rectangle bouncing a square ball. That's the advantage that videogames have over TV shows, films or books; with games, we get to interact with worlds first-hand, and no genre enables you to do that like the role-playing game.

RPGs showcase videogaming at its most ambitious, placing you in the shoes of a protagonist who must grow, interact with other characters, battle monsters, learn skills and explore the landscape. They offer everything from high-fantasy epics to science-fiction showstoppers and take you on adventures that can move you to your core.

Here, we will celebrate everything the genre has to offer, from its small but ambitious beginnings to the world dominance it holds today. Pack your backpack, grab your sword and pack a few potions of healing – it's going to be one heck of a journey!

FUTURE

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The RPG Book

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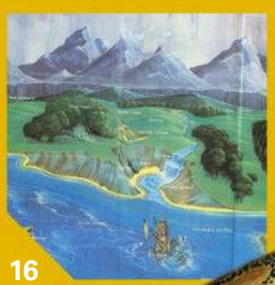
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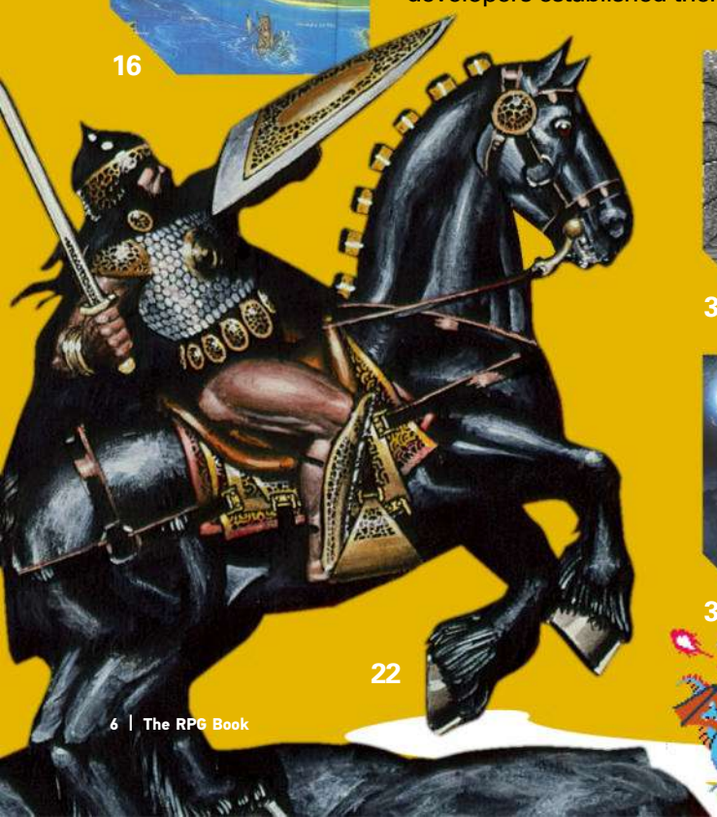
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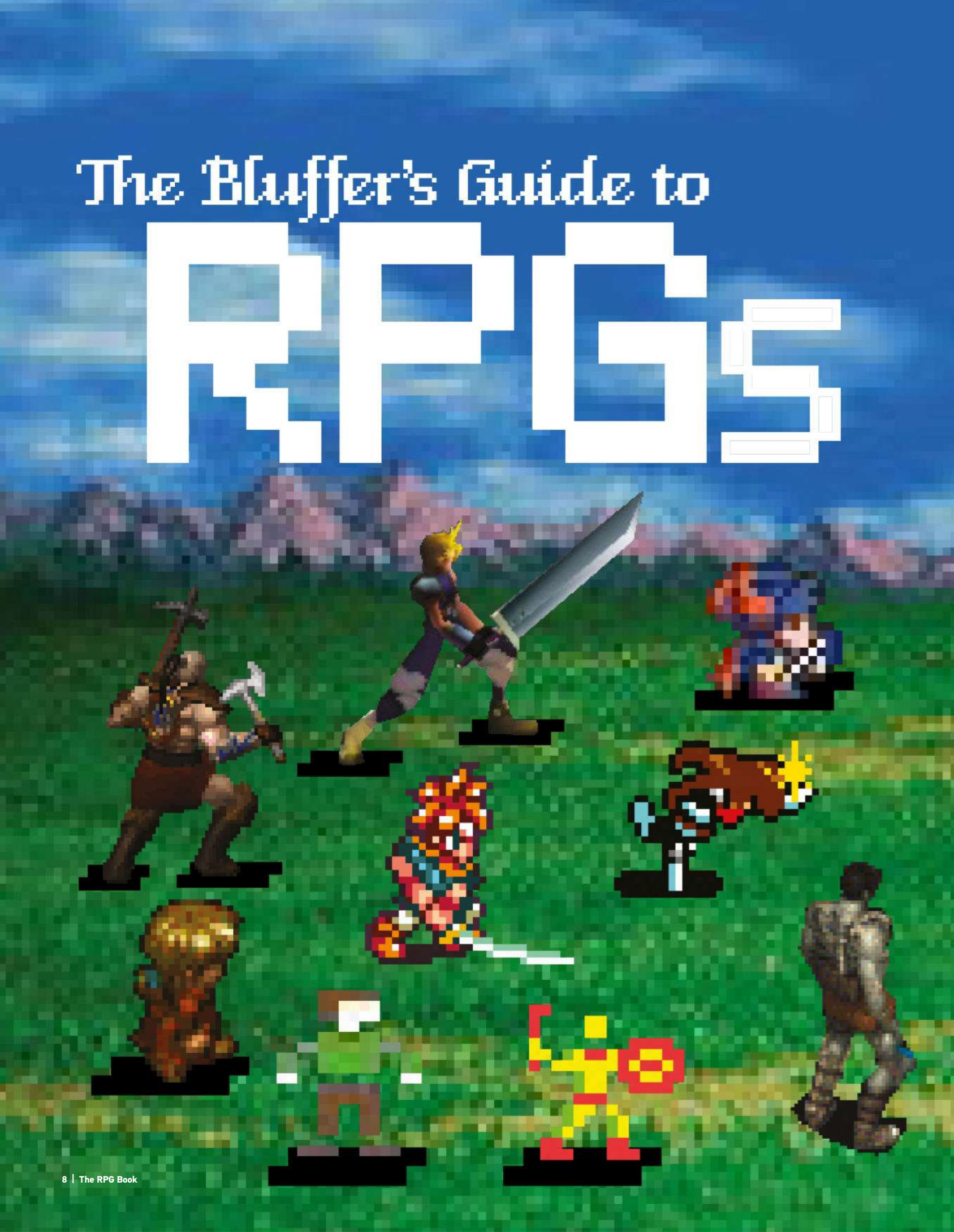
The Bluffer's Guide to RPGs



With obsessive fans, a slew of subgenres, locations ranging from high fantasy to hard sci-fi, convoluted stats and a range of combat systems, RPGs truly come in flavours to appeal to all tastes. Let's look back over the decades-long history of one of gaming's most revered genres

Words by Craig Richie

The story of computer and console role-playing games begins on a table, as one could imagine, with Gary Gygax and Dave Arneson's *Dungeons & Dragons*. Combining the nerdy delights of Tolkien-esque high fantasy complete with magic, elves, and hobbits – sorry, halflings – with the obsessive attention to detail present in tabletop wargaming, *D&D* immediately won over hearts and minds when it was released in 1974. It was intended for an audience already familiar with the tabletop wargaming scene. And because its original incarnation did not specify exactly how combat should be played out, as *D&D* spread throughout North America, and eventually the world, it turned out that play varied depending on where you were and how the local gamers had decided to interpret the rules and implement their own combat. It would actually take a while for the original fantasy RPG that gave rise to so many games since to have its own hard set of rules that were globally adapted.

As anyone who has played a tabletop or pen-and-paper role-playing game can tell you, dealing with all of those dice rolls, keeping track of all your hit points, manually managing your inventory and mapping out everything by hand can be a tedious, yet uniquely, thrilling experience. Maybe some of us are just spoiled by technology (read: lazy), but we're sure many of us prefer letting a computer take care of all those finicky details and thus reduce a battle from three hours to 30 seconds. Thankfully, some tech-minded fans of *D&D* felt the same.

As history has shown, the kind of person that is drawn to tabletop wargaming, fantasy role-playing and all of the statistics, rules and number crunching involved is also the kind of person who would tinker with computers or spend their time programming, and digital incarnations of *D&D* started appearing as early as 1975. Some of the first releases include *pedit5*, *dnd* and *Dungeon*, and comprised simple simulations of the *D&D* experience coded and then played on terminals connected to a PDP-10 or PLATO mainframe. Rusty Rutherford, author of *pedit5*, spent just over a month producing what is now regarded as the oldest playable computer RPG. Sporting a simple ▶

CLASSIC RPG CLICHES

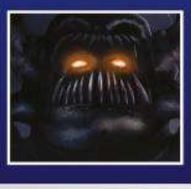
There's a lot of things about this genre that developers take for granted. Here are some of the most notable

YOUNG HERO WAKES UP IN BED!

■ It seems that a good night's rest and a solid sleep are essential prerequisites before you can get down to some good ol' questin' fun, and this is where many a game begins. You get bonus points if you awaken to your mum/wisened-old-man guardian calling to you from downstairs.

THE ENEMY IS... YOUR BROTHER!

■ What!? [surprised face] All this time, the arch-enemy is none other than the brother you never knew you had, that no one told you about and that you had absolutely no idea existed until this great revelation! Also, he might only be your half-brother. But never your sister. That would be totally unorthodox.

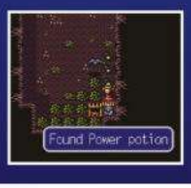


LIGHTING A CAMPFIRE OR SLEEPING IN A TENT EQUATES TO A STAY IN HOSPITAL!

■ Yes, somehow having a bite to eat and a good kip next to the fire can heal all wounds, mend broken limbs and, in rare cases, even cure diseases and poison. Top tip: if camping under the stars is not your thing, erecting a tent on a dungeon floor can be just as effective.

CONVENIENT TREASURE CHESTS!

■ So you've made it all the way through multiple levels of a dungeon, survived a host of battles and are down to your last healing potion with only three mana points left. Good thing, then, that the boss you're about to fight has left a chest full of replenishing items just outside his door for you to help yourself to!



WE HAVE A VERMIN PROBLEM – AND YOU ARE OUR ONLY HOPE!

■ Before you can save the world, it is obligatory to clear out a basement full of rats. This is not negotiable and any would be adventurers hoping to attain the status of Hero Of All The Land first has to complete this pest control rite of passage.

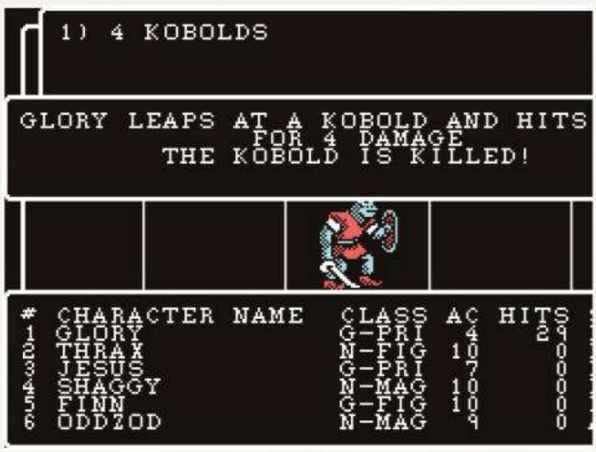
HI STRANGER. HERE'S MY LIFE STORY!

■ One staple of many RPGs is the abundance of NPCs who are willing to immediately tell a complete stranger every single thing about themselves – their life story, their hopes and dreams, their greatest fears – a few seconds into initiating their first conversation ever.

HI STRANGER. WE ENTRUST YOU WITH OUR SURVIVAL!

■ Fantasy and sci-fi worlds are chock-full of people who are more than happy to task you with saving them from an evil overlord, fending off an undead horde or basically any task that means they don't have to bother with any kind of collective action.

▶ graphical representation of the dungeon you're exploring, as well as listing your character stats, spells, inventory and so on, *pedit5*'s name is derived from the files allocated by the Population and Energy Group, for whom Rusty was working as a PLATO programmer. While the strict limitations on storage meant that he was not able to implement as much as he would have liked to, the game was nevertheless very popular and can still be experienced today via PLATO emulators running on the web. Perhaps the most incredible thing to take away is that, despite being one of the first of its kind and now almost 50 years old, much of the interface and overall presentation of the game can still be seen in modern RPGS.

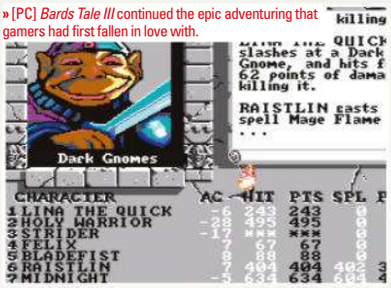

1) 4 KOBOLDS
GLORY LEAPS AT A KOBOLD AND HITS
FOR 4 DAMAGE
THE KOBOLD IS KILLED!
CHARACTER NAME CLASS AC HITS
1 GLORY G-PRI 4 29
2 THRAX N-FIG 10 0
3 JESUS G-PRI 7 0
4 SHAGGY N-MAG 10 0
5 FINN G-FIG 10 0
6 ODDZOD N-MAG 9 0

The next milestone in early computer RPGs would again come from students trying to use their college's serious hardware for mucking about in games. This time round, unlike PLATO and similar systems, the games would be built on terminals without any graphical capabilities. It was 1980, and the combined efforts of Glenn Wichman and Michael Toy led to the grandfather of the traditional dungeon crawler: *Rogue*. Using a simple interface made up of numbers, letters and symbols to represent the player, the dungeon and its inhabitants, *Rogue* saw players venturing deeper and deeper into a dungeon to retrieve the Amulet Of Yendor, fighting monsters, picking up items and generally just trying to survive in the *D&D*-themed world. Glenn and Michael also added in the ingenious element of procedurally generating a new dungeon every time the game was played, and made the challenging game even more unforgiving by implementing permadeath: once your little @-symbol hero died, that was it. Time to start again in an entirely new, randomised dungeon. The challenge of permadeath and the replayability brought about by procedural generation has seen the entire subgenre, known as roguelikes, persist as a niche area of computer RPGs that is proving timeless. From the earliest roots in *Rogue* itself and then the commercial adaptation *Telengard*, through to modern incarnations such as *Dungeons Of Dredmor*, *Rogue Legacy* and hundreds of similar 'roguelike' games. Even Blizzard's dungeon-crawling *Diablo* series clearly has its roots planted in Glenn and Michael's classic.

» [PC] It may look rather basic, but *Wizardry* was a very important evolution of the genre for many gamers.

» [SNES] Colourful and packed with personality, *Secret Of Mana* tops the SNES' action-RPG lineup.

» [PC] *Bards Tale III* continued the epic adventuring that gamers had first fallen in love with.


killing
Dark Gnomes
RAISTLIN casts spell Mage Flame
CHARACTER AC HIT PTS SPL
1 LINA THE QUICK -6 243 243 0
2 HOLY WARRIOR -28 495 495 0
3 STRIDER -17 *** *** 0
4 FELIX 7 67 67 0
5 BLADEFIST 8 88 88 0
6 RAISTLIN 7 404 404 402
7 MIDNIGHT -5 634 634 634

It was around the same time that *Rogue* was gaining popularity that gamers saw the emergence of the good old first-person dungeon-crawler. The biggest name, and arguably most important and influential title from the early Eighties, was *Wizardry: Proving Grounds Of The Mad Overlord*, developed by Andrew Greenberg and Robert Woodhead. Released in 1981 by Sir-Tech Software, this was high fantasy fare that brought a Tolkien-inspired, *Dungeons & Dragons*-flavoured world to home computer gamers. It presented a simple but unique 3D perspective – *Wizardry*'s graphics were little more than primitive lines marking walls, passageways and so forth – but in 1981, this was enough to allow players to become completely immersed in the world as they guided their party of adventurers through ten labyrinthine levels of traps, puzzles and monsters before battling the evil wizard Werdna. *Wizardry* differed from *Rogue* and its ilk not just in the player's perspective, but also in the fact that it had carefully crafted mazes to explore complete with scripted encounters and

intentionally paced progression of challenge. It also presented a menu-based interface that is still a staple in many console RPGs to this day. Incidentally, the early titles in Richard Garriot's *Ultima* games, also very successful, followed *Wizardry*'s formula before changing to the isometric view more commonly associated with the series. While one of the most successful at the time, *Wizardry* may not have been the very first but it was the most popular, and went on to boast the greatest legacy. The very similar PLATO-based *Oubliette* came out earlier and its direct influence can be seen in *Wizardry*'s spell names, interface and more, but, of course, more people had Apple IIs and Commodore 64s in their homes than had access to mainframes running PLATO, and it went on to be one of the best-selling computer games of the era.

After an early-Eighties surge, the first-person dungeon crawler would continue its popularity for close to 15 years, with various games combining either real-time or turn-based combat with the genre's staple exploration and puzzle solving. For many years, players also needed to keep a stack of graph paper around for hand-drawing and annotating their own maps. This was essential for beating most of these titles, and was a far more efficient approach to the game than endlessly wandering the halls and mazes while trying, often vainly, to commit all the locations to memory. *The Bard's Tale III: Thief Of Fate*, released in 1988, added an auto-mapping feature, and was quickly followed by *Might And Magic II* offering the same, provided one of your characters possessed the cartography skill. This was a momentous addition to the genre, yet even though it was so obviously useful and popular, some games opted to forego it and stick to the more traditional 'draw-your-own' option.

Landmark titles in the first-person dungeon crawler line include *Dungeon Master*, *Bloodwych*, and the award-winning *Eye Of The Beholder* series, and we have to give a special nod to *Wizardry 8*, the series' outstanding final outing from 2001. The subgenre's popularity persists today as evidenced by the popularity of Atlus's *Etrian Odyssey* series and the success of Almost Human Games's *Legend Of Grimrock* and its sequel *Legend Of Grimrock II* .

"Wizardry may not have been the very first but it was the most popular"

While we're on the subject of *Wizardry*, it's time to head over the Pacific and appreciate what an absolute hit the series was, and still remains, in Japan. There are now far more Japanese titles and spin-offs in the series than the eight core titles released in the west, including Game Boy Color remakes of the first three games, plus non-gaming tie-ins such as manga and anime productions. *Wizardy*'s significance in Japan is also marked by what would go on to be one the most important encounters with the game, when one Koichi Nakamura picked it up early in his own games development career. Together with Yuji Horii, who was a keen player of the early *Ultima* games, Nakamura would go on to make the grandfather of the Japanese RPG, *Dragon Warrior*. RPGs were gaining popularity in Japan thanks to titles such as *Dragon Slayer* and *Bokosuka Wars* seeing great commercial success, and the duo decided to work on their own vision of a role-playing game.

» [NES] 35 years on, the original *Final Fantasy* still has all of its original charm.

» [PC] *Eye Of The Beholder* was an RPG that did a fantastic job of capturing early *Dungeons & Dragons* adventures.

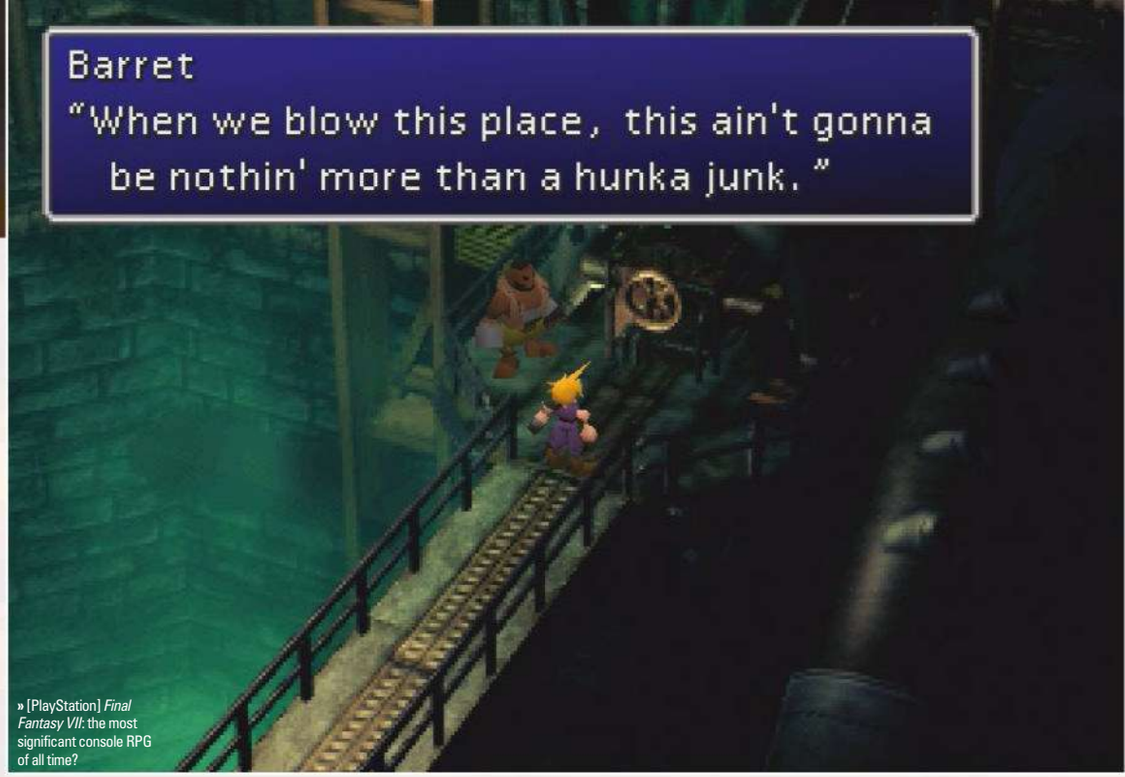
Released on the Famicom (the NES over here) in May 1986, this *Wizardry*-inspired, yet visually and functionally very different, beast laid the foundation for a long line of RPGs that were, and still are, wholly distinct from what we generally see released outside of Japan, so much so that it helped give rise to what is now referred to as the Japanese RPG, or JRPG. *Dragon Quest*, originally titled *Dragon Warrior* when it was first released in the west, introduced role-playing gamers to the brightly coloured tile-based overworld adventuring, the random combat encounters and that element of cuteness and juvenile frivolity within a much darker overall plot that, despite technological advances, persist to this day as staples of the genre. Indeed, you only have to look at 'the other JPRG franchise' to see all of these characteristics at play: *Final Fantasy*.

Sharing many common traits with *Dragon Quest*, down to similarities in the appearance of the tile-based world, the management of inventory and the similar combat mechanics, *Final Fantasy* saw players guiding a small party of young adventurers known as the Warriors Of Light on their quest to defeat the Four Elemental Fiends and the evil Chaos. This theme of a band of young adventurers tasked with saving the world would run through much of the series, with the *Final Fantasy* games often telling coming-of-age stories highlighting the character's fears, hopes, dreams and personal emotional turmoils. This added depth to the characters introduced a new level of empathy that many RPG players were not used to. Instead of player-created characters that were little more than a list of stats, now gamers were controlling predetermined beings that could be identified with, and in turn empathised with. RPGs had made the shift from having ▶

NO IMPORT? NO PROBLEM

The hardcore fans who are providing solutions to Japanese exclusive RPGS

Many of the most highly acclaimed console RPGs never saw a release outside of Japan, meaning that unless you had a basic grasp of Japanese and could read kanji, hiragana and katakana, there was a lot of adventuring that westerners were missing out on. With the proliferation of console ROMS appearing online in the late Nineties, fan translation projects of everything from the major series to the most obscure titles got underway. Through standardised patching methods, it's now easy to hack a ROM and experience these classics in your native tongue. Among our favourites is the fan translation of the third *Dragon Warrior* (née *Quest*) game, where the superb SNES version never saw an English release until 2019. Now the Switch version has been released and a 'HD-2D' remake is in the works, we'd suggest going for those, but nothing beats playing the (translated) original!



» [PlayStation] *Final Fantasy VII*: the most significant console RPG of all time?

▶ a basic storyline or bit of a plot serving as a vehicle to fight monsters and level up your heroes to being full-fledged stories with richly developed characters. There are plenty of stories of *Final Fantasy* having brought gamers to tears, with the most cited moment being *that* bit in *Final Fantasy VII*. Role-playing games had fundamentally changed, and the emphasis on characterisation would go on to influence games the world over, with a more human side appearing in all but the most stern adherents to the basic dungeon-crawling formula.

The most incorrectly named franchise in gaming, *Final Fantasy* has now seen 15 games in the main series (with a 16th instalment currently in development) as well as countless spin-offs, tie-ins, strategy games and tactical RPGs that cover almost every home system since the original game was released on the Famicom in late 1987. *Final Fantasy* is also responsible for bringing in countless innovations to the genre over the years, from the hybrid real-time/turn-based combat of their patented Active Time Battle system, the opportunity for a character to change classes or 'Jobs', and the experimental move from the standard level-based system to a skills-based system. The latter saw a shift from the traditional 'level-up with enough experience points' to a scenario where only those skills or attributes that were actively used would improve. This particular novelty can now be seen in the likes of the *Elder Scrolls* series.

Just as *Dragon Quest* and *Final Fantasy* were rising to popularity in Japan, back in the United States things were coming full circle when the original inspiration for many of these games, *Dungeons & Dragons*, saw a string of official Computer RPG outings of its own. Produced by SSI, who were better known for complex and realistic war games, the series kicked off with the very successful *Pool Of Radiance*, the first in what would go on to be known as the Gold Box games. It combined the pen-and-paper *Advanced D&D* ruleset, the popular *Forgotten Realms* campaign setting and first-person exploration that switched to turn-based isometric tactical combat during encounters. After a great critical and fan reception, SSI went on to release a total of 14 titles that spanned the *Dragonlance*, *Forgotten Realms*, *Spelljammer* and *Buck Rogers* campaigns. The final title was 1993's *Forgotten Realms: Unlimited Adventures*, which was essentially a Gold Box construction kit, and there are now hundreds of freely available campaigns to be downloaded from frua.rosedragon.org, some of them being of such high quality that they rival SSI's originals.

It was around the time that the Gold Box series was winding down that computer gaming was making the famous shift towards the first-person shooters and real-time strategy games that dominated during the Nineties. PC, Amiga and Atari ST users still enjoyed a number of great RPGs at the time, with the likes of *Eye Of The Beholder* and the outstanding *Ultima VII*, with genre stalwarts *Might And Magic* and *Wizardry* also seeing a few releases. Yet despite these notable titles, RPGs had, for the most part, found their home on consoles, and the SNES, Mega Drive and before too long Sony's PlayStation were becoming the systems of choice for dedicated RPG grinders.

"Final Fantasy has now seen 15 games in the main series"

Console RPGs largely followed the formulas laid out in *Dragon Quest* and *Final Fantasy*, with notable titles including Sega's flagship *Phantasy Star* and Capcom's long-standing *Breath Of Fire* series. The outstanding *Chrono Trigger* is a must-play title from the era, bringing in a number of minor changes to the basic formula that, together with its unforgettable characters, reactive world and multiple endings, see the game firmly planted on the top of many 'Best Ever' lists. RPGs were also branching out and experimenting with different takes on the genre, including the addition of arcade elements in real-time action RPGs with the likes of *Secret Of Mana*, or combining adventuring and puzzle-solving with RPG elements as was the case with the timeless *Legend Of Zelda: A Link To The Past*, which straddles a range of genres (it's RPG enough for many gamers). Around the same time, the more cerebral tactical and strategy RPGs that included the *Shining Force* and *Fire Emblem* games also rose to popularity, and would pave the way for the likes of *Final Fantasy Tactics*. Numerous long-standing RPG series that continue to be popular today have their origins in the mid-Nineties console craze, including *Star Ocean*, *Valkyrie Profile* and *Suikoden*. The *Megami Tensei* series, which saw its first game in 1987 and spawned the *Persona* series, also had a number of its landmark titles released in the Nineties. Its success in the west pales in comparison to its Japanese popularity, where it is overshadowed only by *Dragon Quest* and *Final Fantasy*.

» [Game Boy Color] King of the collect-em-ups, *Pokémon* has sold more copies than any other franchise beside *Mario*.

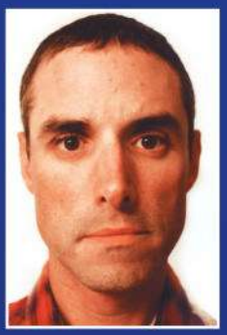
RPGs were now branching out both in terms of gameplay and their fictional settings, spreading beyond being strictly high fantasy or straight up sci-fi affairs. RPG elements had found their way into titles that otherwise had nothing to do with the genre, such as platforming classic *Wonderboy In Monsterland* and arcade beat-'em-ups that included Capcom's official *Dungeons & Dragons* titles. Even the *Castlevania* games from *Symphony Of The Night* onwards can be considered RPGs to some extent, as they tick a fair amount of the right boxes: experience points, a levelling system, stats affected by equipment, a manageable inventory and some degree of character customisation. It may look like a platformer, but you're not fooling us Konami.

» [PC] *Fallout*'s richly detailed post-apocalyptic world was a perfect stray from normal fantasy settings.

Adventure games too have seen their share of their RPG injection, with probably the most notable series being *Quest For Glory* (originally *Hero's Quest*) from Sierra. You could play as a fighter, magic-user or thief, and there were multiple solutions to puzzles depending on skills and character class. There was no levelling system, but rather skills improved with practice and, like many RPGs of

Q&A: JOSH SAWYER

Josh Sawyer (Icewind Dale, Neverwinter Nights 2, Fallout: New Vegas, Pillars Of Eternity) on creating RPG magic



Can you remember the first RPG you played from start to finish?
The Bard's Tale was my first role-playing game (on the Commodore 64), but I never finished it. The first RPG I actually completed was *Bard's Tale II*. I would have been about 11 when it came out. It was a long, hard game. The Snares Of Death were especially difficult, and I had to trade notes with some friends to get through them all.

What were some early RPGs that got you hooked, and which influenced your own game design?
The Bard's Tale, *Wizardry*, *Ultima*, and *Phantasie* series were all big ones. I also played *Basic* and *Expert D&D* before moving over to *AD&D* (First Edition). *The Magic Candle* was also pretty influential because it was so different from the other fantasy RPGs I played. In the late Eighties and early Nineties I played all of the SSI *Gold Box AD&D* games and other tabletop RPGs like *Call Of Cthulhu*, WEG's *Star Wars* and *Paranoia*. That's also when I got hooked on one of my favorite CRPGs, *Darklands*. In the late Nineties, I was in college, where I played a lot of tabletop games and, most notably, the first *Fallout*. Of those games, the original *Pool Of Radiance*, *Darklands*, and *Fallout* had the most impact on me. They allow the player a lot of freedom to define their characters and to make their way through the world as they choose.

So, what makes a good RPG?
Personally, I value the ability to define a character's personality, express that personality meaningfully (ie, with consequence) in the world, and change elements of the story based on the choices I make. These are the things I think are important for an RPG, specifically. But whatever type of game you're making, the mechanics should be enjoyable. If you're going to have combat, make the combat interesting and enjoyable. If you're going to have a skill tree, it should create difficult decisions for the player.

Why do think certain RPGs maintain such a strong following so long after their release?
RPGs often succeed at creating worlds and characters that people want to revisit. The same holds true in books, films, and other media. Even if the mechanics of a game have become easy for veteran players, the fans want to go back for more.

Josh's latest games include *Pillars Of Eternity* and it's sequel *Deadfire*, as well as *The Outer Worlds*. We recommend every one of them!

» [PC] *The Elder Scrolls* series remains immensely popular, and its widespread appeal began with *Morrowind*.

the time, *Quest For Glory* continued the tradition of importing your character into later sequels, allowing an epic adventure if a character were taken through the entire series. The first title, *So You Want To Be A Hero*, is now almost 35 years old and remains one of the most fondly remembered adventure games of all time. Both the 16 colour EGA original and its mouse-driven, 256 colour VGA remake still play brilliantly today.

While Japanese RPGs found their groove early on and continued down much the same successful path since their Eighties roots and subsequent Nineties heyday, the Western RPG has seen a more tumultuous journey while it locked on to its own identity. Japanese RPGs all but dominated the console line-up, and the once thriving computer RPG scene waned as Amigas and Ataris were retired and home gaming choices basically became a split between PC or console. Rather than mimic what was being done on the PlayStation, a number of strong PC and Mac outings in the late Nineties defined what Western RPGs were, with a darker, often more mature setting than the bright colours and youthful protagonists so ubiquitous in the Japanese offerings. Blizzard's *Diablo* became the benchmark for action-RPGs, Interplay's *Fallout* would reignite an interest in the post-nuclear setting, the *Baldur's Gate* series set the gold standard for *Dungeons & Dragons* on home systems and *Planescape: Torment* would take RPG writing to entirely new levels. While console RPGs forged ahead with little variation on their winning formula, computer RPGs had truly undergone a renaissance that has since seen new but characteristically western series reaching bestseller status. Series such as *Star Wars: Knights Of The Old Republic*, *The Witcher*, *Mass Effect* and the later *Elder Scrolls* games are all characteristically Western and all classics in their own right.

The back catalogues of both Japanese and western RPGs encompass thousands of hours of playing time, and this extends to the near infinite if we start including *World Of Warcraft*, *Final Fantasy XI*/ *Final Fantasy XIV*, and the slew of other MMORPGs just waiting to suck gamers' lives away. And if you've somehow managed to play them all, well, the resurgence of indie gaming and the popularity of Kickstarter projects that recall the classics means that the RPG in all its forms has cemented itself as a genre that not only has decades behind it, but doubtless has decades more still to come. ✱

» [PC] Blizzard's *World Of Warcraft* took the genre in exciting new directions.

RPG Legends

We reveal some of the best RPG adventurers from four decades of gaming. If you're heading out on a dangerous quest then these are the heroes you should add to your party

CLOUD STRIFE

FIRST APPEARANCE: Final Fantasy VII
DISTINGUISHING FEATURES: Unruly blonde hair, a purple outfit and cubes for hands
WEAPON OF CHOICE: Buster Sword

■ A former SOLDIER turned mercenary, Cloud sides up with AVALANCHE against the evil Shinra Electric Power Company, which is responsible for draining the planet of its natural Mako energy. At first brash and apparently selfish, as *FFVII* moves on Cloud proves himself a deep and emotionally rich character, and remains a fan favourite 25 years after he first graced our TVs.

LEGEND LEVEL

TORNEKO TALOON

FIRST APPEARANCE: Dragon Warrior IV
DISTINGUISHING FEATURES: Paunch belly, purpley hair
WEAPON OF CHOICE: Price negotiation

■ The pudgy, purple-haired merchant from *Chapters Of The Chosen* is far from your standard, feisty teenage JRPG hero, but his great design and unusual take on being a hero saw him prove so popular that he had a cameo in *Dragon Quest VIII* and *Dragon Quest IX*, and starred in his own roguelike spin-off game that unfortunately never made it out of Japan.

LEGEND LEVEL

RYU

FIRST APPEARANCE: Breath Of Fire
DISTINGUISHING FEATURES: Blue hair, occasionally quite dragon-ish
WEAPON OF CHOICE: Price negotiation

■ Part child, part dragon, this blue-haired protagonist is also one of the most accomplished fishermen in RPG history. Part of an ancient dragon clan, Ryu gains the ability to transform into one of the mythical beasts as he continues the ancient battle between good and evil along with his friend and part-time love interest, the winged and magical young Nina.

LEGEND LEVEL

GERALT

FIRST APPEARANCE: The Witcher
DISTINGUISHING FEATURES: Gravelly voice, long white hair and cat-like eyes
WEAPON OF CHOICE: Silver and steel swords

■ A human who was inducted into the Witcher order by undergoing the 'Trial Of The Grasses' where his body was exposed to monster mutagens, Geralt has superhuman strength, agility and stamina, making him the perfect monster hunter. Often embroiled in conspiracies and conflicts against his will, this good-hearted hero tries to forge the best way through morally grey situations.

LEGEND LEVEL

KREIA

FIRST APPEARANCE: Knights Of The Old Republic II
DISTINGUISHING FEATURES: Blind, covers most of her face with a hood
WEAPON OF CHOICE: Lightsaber, The Force

■ A blind yet highly skilled Jedi Master, she is so strong with the force that she is able to see without natural eyesight. She was master to Revan, and her interest in the history of the Sith and disagreements with the council set her off on a dangerous path towards the dark side. Kreia embodies character depth and mystery, and holds a fair amount of secrets for players to discover.

LEGEND LEVEL

MINSC

FIRST APPEARANCE: Baldur's Gate
DISTINGUISHING FEATURES: Bald head, purple markings, hamster side-kick
WEAPON OF CHOICE: Two-handed sword

■ Minsc is a powerful Rashemen ranger, loyal to the last in his quest to protect compatriot magic-user Dynaheir. He's a popular Forgotten Realms character, appearing in all the *Baldur's Gate* games and one of the few who is playable throughout the series. Another of Minsc's most stand-out features is his relationship with Boo, which he is convinced is a Miniature Giant Space Hamster. Sure, why not?

LEGEND LEVEL

IOLO

FIRST APPEARANCE: Ultima I
DISTINGUISHING FEATURES: Salt-and-pepper hair
WEAPON OF CHOICE: Crossbow

■ A stalwart of the *Ultima* series, Iolo, like Lord British and the Avatar was born on Earth before he ventured to Sosaria. The loyal and friendly bard has travelled with the Avatar (or, the Stranger if you prefer) lending his considerable skills with both a lute and a crossbow, and along with the likes of Shamino and Dupre is a valued and steadfast member of the Companions Of The Avatar.

LEGEND LEVEL

COMMANDER SHEPARD

FIRST APPEARANCE: Mass Effect
DISTINGUISHING FEATURES: Custom good looks
WEAPON OF CHOICE: Pistol, shotgun, assault rifle, omni-tool and biotics.

■ A soldier and starship commander who has attained the highest level of military training, Shepard is not only the face of humanity in the galaxy, but also its final hope against the Reapers. Playable as either a male or female and just as well produced and voiced for both, the active and vocal Shepard is the antithesis of the traditional silent protagonist.

LEGEND LEVEL

ALYS BRANGWIN

FIRST APPEARANCE: Phantasy Star IV: End Of The Millennium
DISTINGUISHING FEATURES: Brown hair, red & white clothing
WEAPON OF CHOICE: Slicer

■ An about-turn in the tradition of having an old man mentor a la Obi-Wan Kenobi, the young and vibrant Alys is the most renowned member of the Hunter's Guild and serves as guide and teacher to *PSIV*'s protagonist, Chaz. Highly skilled with a slicer and able to command fire magic, Alys plays a crucial role in Chaz's quest.

LEGEND LEVEL

FROG

FIRST APPEARANCE: Chrono Trigger
DISTINGUISHING FEATURES: An overwhelming froginess to him
WEAPON OF CHOICE: Masumane sword

■ Born a human named Glenn, Frog is one of the most iconic and popular characters in JRPG history. Gallant and loyal, this powerful and skilled swordsman (swordsfrog?) seeks to avenge the death of a close friend by defeating the evil sorcerer Magus. He also wields water magic and can unleash some devastating combo attacks when teaming up with his party members.

LEGEND LEVEL

RUDY ROUGHKNIGHT

FIRST APPEARANCE: Wild Arms
DISTINGUISHING FEATURES: Bright blue hair, red headband and a white plaster permanently on his cheek
WEAPON OF CHOICE: Hand cannon

■ Rudy Roughknight is the protagonist and one of three key characters in the *Wild Arms* series. With the ability to wield the titular Ancient Relic Machines (ARMs), the former orphan becomes a veritable force as he traverses the Wild West-inspired wastelands of Filgaia with his posse of friends in tow.

LEGEND LEVEL

HK-47

FIRST APPEARANCE: Knights Of The Old Republic
DISTINGUISHING FEATURES: That metallic shine
WEAPON OF CHOICE: Blaster rifle

■ A Hunter-Killer droid constructed by Revan with the express intention of serving as his personal assassin, this 'meatbag'-hating artificial intelligence is packed with more personality than many living companions we've journeyed with over the years. The closest thing to being inorganic 'evil', HK-47 was great to have along to add a bit of spice if you were opting for an otherwise goody-two shoes Jedi adventure.

LEGEND LEVEL

VIVI ORNITIER

FIRST APPEARANCE: Final Fantasy IX
DISTINGUISHING FEATURES: Large hat, blue clothes, glowing yellow eyes
WEAPON OF CHOICE: Black magic

■ Vivi is one of those brilliantly crafted characters whose visual design is as outstanding as his personality. The at first stumbling and shy Black Mage undergoes a great journey of personal development over the course of his adventure. Deep, conflicted and emotionally engaging, Vivi stands out as one of the best examples of RPG character development we've ever seen.

LEGEND LEVEL

ISAAC

FIRST APPEARANCE: Golden Sun
DISTINGUISHING FEATURES: Yellow cape, same barber as Cloud Strife
WEAPON OF CHOICE: Venus magic

■ Isaac is the young, Djinn collecting, earth magic playable-character tasked with preventing the return of the forces of Alchemy to the world of Weynard. Like Link, Isaac is the opposite of the Shepard school of protagonists, being almost entirely mute for the duration of the series – an alternative for players looking to project themselves into what they imagine the hero's personality to be.

LEGEND LEVEL

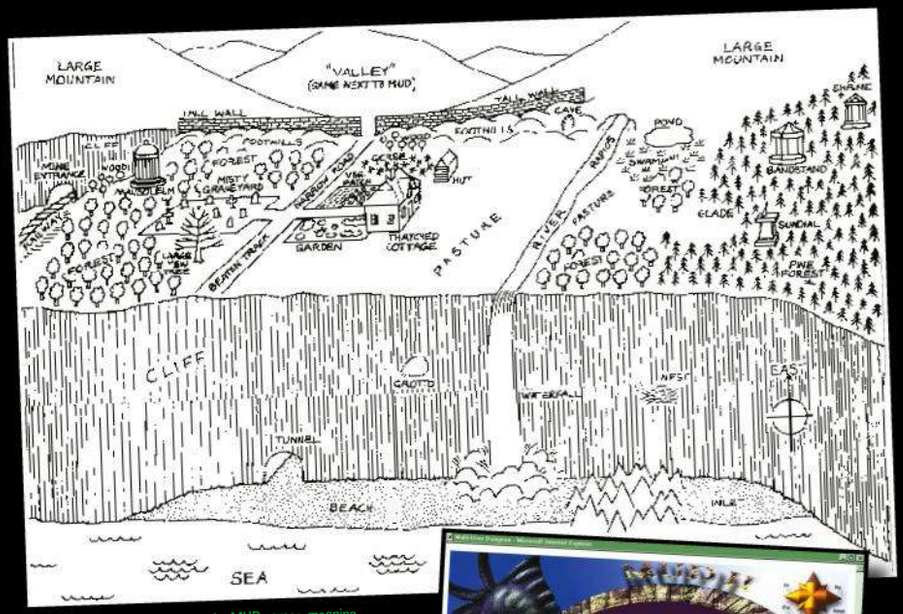
THE STORY OF MUD:

THE ORIGINAL MMO

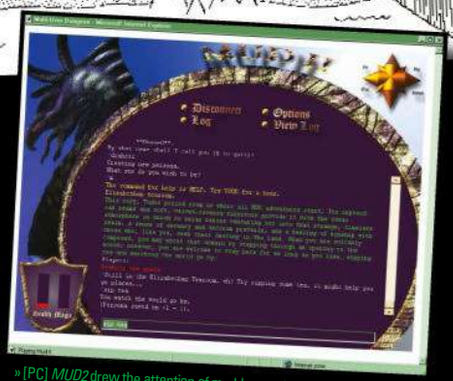
THERE WERE ONLY A HANDFUL OF SEMINAL TITLES AT THE DAWN OF VIDEOGAMING AS WE KNOW IT, AND MUD – WITH ITS VAST AND ECLECTIC COMMUNITY OF VIRTUAL WORLDS – WAS ONE SUCH GAME, A CONCEPT EMBEDDED WITHIN THE MMOS WE PLAY TODAY

WORDS BY ADAM BARNES

The Story of MUD: The Original Dungeon Delver



» There were no in-game maps for MUD games, meaning players would often create their own.



» [PC] *MUD2* drew the attention of modders and a slew of homebrew MUDs followed in its wake.

There's a profound sensation in remembering those earliest of videogame experiences, the same sort of feeling that you might encounter when remembering some of the fondest memories from your past. Compared to how videogames are now, those early games were primitive… but critically important. Think about how it might have felt at the moment in time that came with the discovery of fire and perhaps you might summon an almost ethereal sensation, as though we all still have the memory of that spark. As a gamer, those uncountable days before home systems harbours that same feeling; it was a digital frontier, not only because of the newness of it all but because of how secular and unknown it all was.

Mainframe computers, used in universities, were almost exclusively the only manner in which young coders could experiment, and the internet was not yet sufficient enough to share the information so readily. Students and early programmers were each trying to understand just what computing was capable of, and in many cases utilising their shared interest in tabletop games to craft experiences from within a computer. "They often talk about the 'hacker culture'," begins Richard Bartle, professor at the University Of Essex, "where people would be taking things to pieces and putting them together and just trying things out just for fun. But it wasn't that when you came to university and you started to do computing: everyone was like that, so you just fell into it." This 'dawn of videogames' was born from these very people, the sorts willing to explore and invent when there was nothing laid before them.

» [PC] Eventually MUDs would require Telnet clients to connect to the service.

"The early history of *MUD* comes from a friend of mine, Roy Truckshaw, at the University Of Essex who was in the year above me," explains Richard, who was also one of the two core 'developers' on *MUD*, though the name was not even close to becoming common parlance at the time. "[Roy] wanted to write some communication system so that people could send messages to each other, basically," explains Richard of how the game came to be. "He applied for the

The ways in which MUD has shaped virtual worlds

Exploration
Since the whole concept was built on the concept of a virtual, connected world, the ability to explore in *MUD* was important. This was mostly done with creative writing and not visuals.

Treasure hoarding
One of the two ways to collect points was to 'swamp' your treasure, which essentially meant going to the necessary swamp location and dropping your loot there.

Player versus Player
PVP would later go on to become perhaps the biggest aspect to any MMO, yet while it was controlled to an extent in *MUD* it was still an area that some players were driven by.

Levelling
Reaching the maximum level of 'wiz' – or wizard – was the ultimate goal in *MUD*, an aim that remains the key focus for practically any modern MMO, often with modern players aiming to be the first to reach maximum level.

Dying
There was a saying in *MUD*'s marketing that said, "You haven't lived until you've died in *MUD*." Death, then, was a common part of the experience, which *Rogue* and roguelikes have since adopted in the years since.

Socialising
The social side of *MUD* was integral to its popularity and growth, but there some people who preferred interacting with others over playing the game – and from there a whole branch of MUDs and, later, games grew.

Player-created goals
It would take game designers the longest time to realise the strength of empowering its players with self-created goals, but *MUD* was doing that from the start, freeing players to explore, loot, kill or level up.

In-game events
Weekly events where players would let their hair down became a part of the experience that many would purposefully log in for, a facet that MMOs enhanced with their seasonal and one-off events.

Role-playing
The biggest part of *MUD*, for its developers, was to enrich players with an opportunity to role-play as different people, the anonymity of the internet giving players the chance to experiment with their own personas.

Continuous development
The idea of a MUD being 'finished' is still humorous to many devoted fans still playing and updating their favourite MUDs. It's typical of any modern game to be enhanced over time today, but none have been gradually tweaked over the course of 30 to 40 years.

» [PC] *Habitat* by LucasArts was released for PC, as well as the Commodore 64, Mac and FM Towns Marty.

necessary privileges to be able to do this but was turned down on the basis that the interprocess communication facility was a finite resource. There was only ever 512 blocks that could be sent, and if he made a problem and he used a lot of it up, the rest of the mainframe wouldn't be able to proceed – it would cause a crash. So he was looking for other ways of doing that, and he came across shared memory." This technique, we're told, involved utilising the higher segment of the DECSystem 10's memory that was ordinarily unavailable. What this meant was that any users accessing the higher segment could see changes as they happened, allowing for the sending of messages and paving the way for a totally different kind of social interaction.

"Roy had played *Advent*, which is the name we called *Adventure* or *Colossal Cave*," says Richard, "but that wasn't an inspiration for it at all." It is a misconception that *MUD* – and by extension, the games that followed – was inspired by Will Crowther's seminal text adventure, simply by virtue of the title coming first. But that wasn't the case here, "He wanted to create a world," says Richard, who admits that it was mostly the interface of *Colossal Cave* that had inspired Roy. "He liked the idea of a virtual world, and with this new technique he had discovered – well, new to us – he opened doors and with it was able to create a shared world." This would be the defining aspect of *MUD* – its name, even, formed by an unromantic need to explain its function rather than its entertainment value. "Roy wanted to get across the idea of what it was he was doing," recalls Richard of the game's name, "it was multi-user so it was '*MU*' for a start. There was a version of the game called *Zork* doing the rounds, which on the DECSystem-10 was called *DUNGEN*, without an 'O' because we were only allowed six letters in our file names. So he was saying, 'Well, in order to get an idea of what the game was, it is like a multi-user version of the game *Zork*.' It's often been reported that it was based on *Dungeons & Dragons*, but that's not true. Roy had never played *D&D*." The focus was never to replicate these games, however, and provide a twist on what was already there. *MUD* may have owed some aspect of its interface to *Colossal Cave* and was utilising the style of game seen in *Zork*, but that was just a loose connection, a means to an end. For Roy and Richard, *MUD* was about that multi-user experience.

Roy's work had only lasted a week before he and Richard met in 1978; the two hit it off quickly. Both had come from poorer regions of the UK and had managed to get to university,

» [PC] *Sindome*, a cyberpunk MUD, was more heavy on text, in order to give players a more descriptive sense of the world.

Active MUDS you can join right now

DragonRealms

This is certainly the most ambitious of MUDs, allowing intriguing features, like the ability to run your own shop, craft gear and buy a home. It's one of the longest running MUDs – despite releasing as late as 1996 – and has one of the biggest worlds to explore.

Aardwolf MUD

This is currently the most popular and most recommended MUDs and is constantly evolving. One of its most innovative features is the real-time overhead map, which enables users to more effectively find their way around the huge map.

Armageddon

As you might expect from the title, *Armageddon* is set in a post-apocalyptic empty desert with a few sparse towns to wander around. The emphasis here is on role-playing in the hardcore setting, and it continues to have a diehard community.

Achaea

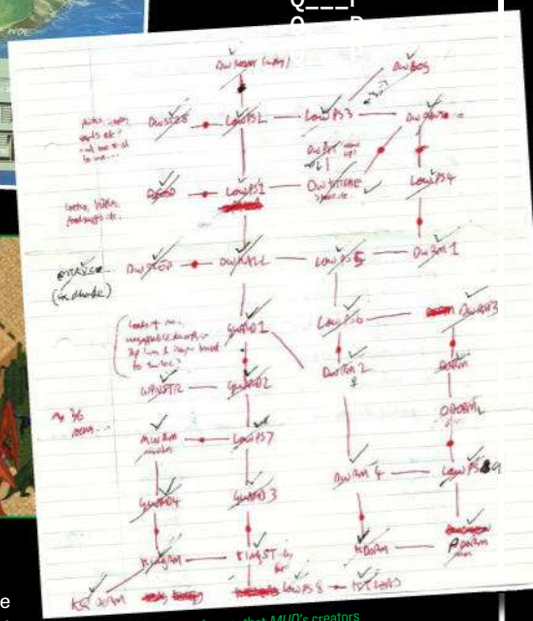
Easily one of the highest-rated MUDs of all time – mostly because of the grand features that it introduced. With 17 classes, it's one of the most expansive. Here, players can lead a city-state, run a mining empire or even become a dragon.

Sindome

On the other scale is *Sindome*, a cyberpunk MUD that takes its influence from a range of sources – books, videogames and films alike. It has one of the more unique settings and is renowned for its friendliness for newcomers and its helpful staff.

» This colour poster was handed out as part of the *MUD2* starter kit, and depicted 'The Land' from *MUD1*.

Delver



» One of the many sheets of paper that *MUD*'s creators needed just to keep track of the game world.

"I PLAYED D&D AND KNEW QUITE A BIT ABOUT ROLE-PLAY"

Richard Bartle

and both had a desire to create a virtual world that could be viewed as an improvement on our own. "I'd already written some games, I played *D&D* and knew quite a bit about role-play," says Richard, explaining that from this prior week of work Roy had already created two versions of *MUD*. "The first version took him about two hours and that was to test the tech. The second was the main one, and that took about a year. This was written in assembly language, and the part of the way that the game worked was when you wanted to add content – what is now called content, anyway, we didn't have a word for it back then – it was done from within the game. He gave a number of us – I mean, maybe three – the ability to write and create objects within this world. I was one of them, and the reason I was one of them was because I was good at it. I had created things for games before, and so it was second nature to me."

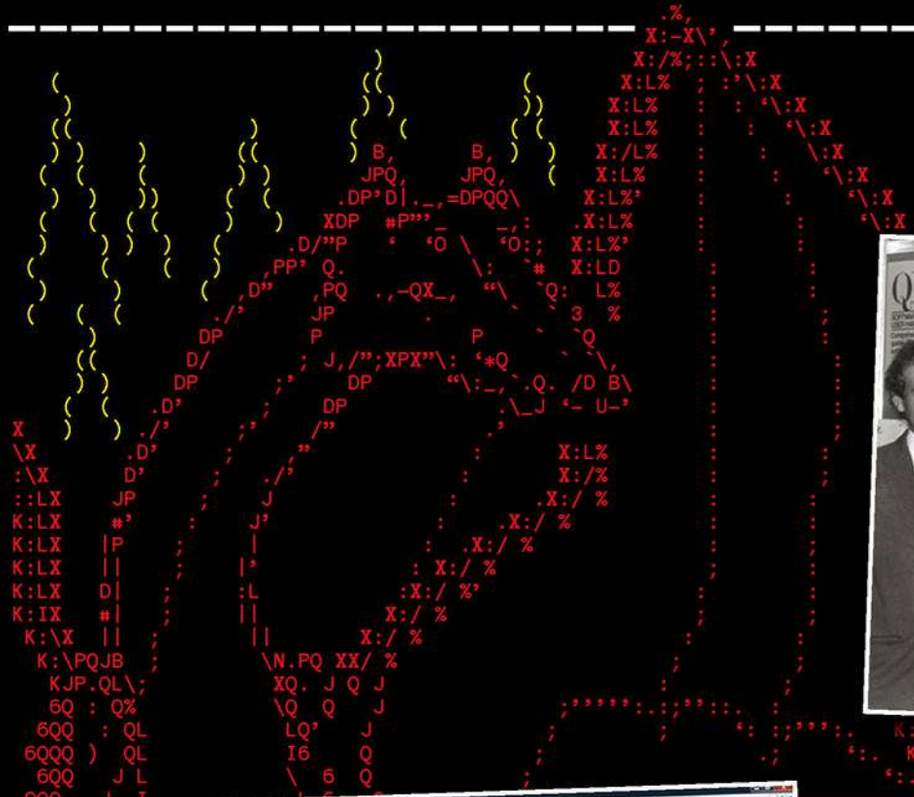
Anyone else might have focused solely on the gameplay, emphasising the role-playing elements or ensuring a core arc to the story. But while these were undoubtedly important aspects to the game, both Roy and Richard cared more about creating a virtual world. "This is why Roy and I got along so well," says Richard. "Neither of us are from great backgrounds, I come from a remote coastal town on the east of Yorkshire: down south in Essex, it sounded like I was a farmer. Roy comes from Wolverhampton, he sounds like he should be working in a factory. But we were both smart, if we hadn't have been we would never have got to university." Richard adds that the British class system, in particular, had always remained an issue for the pair of them, where a lot of your life was decided the moment you're born. The virtual world of *MUD* wasn't intended solely for entertainment, it was going to be for an escape and an opportunity for self-discovery. "We didn't like how the real world judged people, we wanted people to be judged by effectively the strength of their character, who they really were rather than what the world decided they were. We wanted to make a better world, so we did."

Richard would go on to later publish a number of articles and books regarding the matter of game

» [PC] By 1997, *Ultima Online* was proof enough the text-based nature of MUDs were behind us.

design, even so much as defining the four core pillars that any player might fall under: killers, achievers, explorers and socialisers. Though he hadn't conceived the concept at this time, these elements were still present in the design of *MUD* all the same, which affected many of the systems that were implemented. "There's a number of factors that come close together here," says Richard, using the idea of levelling your character up as an example. "People playing games need goals and levels. I knew from *Dungeons & Dragons* that these were a good way of giving players goals. And that's a satisfactory answer in itself, levels did serve that function. But levels aren't the *only* way to serve that function, and there are other ways I considered doing it." Richard added that he had considered myriad options for implementing both goals and levels, whether that was a points system without tiered levels, or using a gear-based system. There was even talk of a democratic system, whereby players could vote for leaders – but, in fact, the gameplay of *MUD* was far more political than even that idea. "Levels were a rebellion against the British class system," says Richard, "because if you're born at level one and you can never get out of level one, that's pretty bad. And we were pretty much born at level one or level two, I suppose. The moment I was born was the moment that I wouldn't become a High Court judge. Ever. Just from my background. With *MUDs*, what we let people do was to see their progress and their status relative to other people, essentially to show everybody that you've all got it within you to be *somebody*."

Whether players knew that or not, this world touched onto something that people wanted. Those



» Becoming 'wiz' – or max level – was a considerable achievement, and here are a few of MUD's earliest wizzes.

» [PC] The original *MUD* has since fallen by the wayside, understandably superseded by the likes of *Aardwolf MUD* – which includes a massive world, deep game systems and player-assisting features, like a map.

» [PC] *Realms Of Despair* used the SMAUG engine and was released in 1994.

▶ interested were able to follow their own story, create the characters that they wanted to be and explore themselves via the game, alongside other players doing exactly the same. But this second version of *MUD* wasn't the one that took off, it was being shared freely, as was typical of games at the time, but it still had its limitations. "Writing things in assembly language is a slow process, so after about a year Roy got frustrated. We ran out of memory anyway because the tools to add content were embedded in the game and that took up memory space. So what he wanted to do was move that out of the game and to do it offline and then created a programming language for designing 'MUDs', as we were now calling them. So he did that and we ended up with the third version of *MUD*, but it became known as *MUD1*." The reason for this weird numerical confusion was simple: the streamlined nature of the new version meant that Roy and Richard could produce a richer world, and that became more compelling to players. Though it was the third version, it was at this point that the game – and with it, the genre – began to really spread under the simple moniker of 'MUD'. "Historically what happened was that people played this game over dial-up, they liked it and some of them wrote their own games." This was the nature of MUDs, their impact having such a strong connection with its players, the majority of who were also like-minded programmers. "Some of t hose games weren't very good," adds Richard, "some of those games were very good. Some of them weren't good but they were played a lot. These games inspired other people to try to make their own. And so on. So there was like an evolution here as people were inspired by these games to make their own."

» [PC] Nowadays some MUDs run from within a browser, and include a number of enhancement features.

What happened was a growth of the 'genre', though it hardly seems apt to call it such. *MUD* was the name of this particular game, but the same moniker was then applied to countless others as they took the game in a direction that they felt was better, more suited to their style. This was where *MUD1* earned its number, a sort of first prize ribbon that denoted it as the original from which all others were born. Over the course of the Eighties, *MUD* continued to grow, drawing in thousands of players keen to, at the very least, try this virtual world. By the start of the Nineties, countless variations on the *MUD* formula had been released; Richard believes that around 100,000 people had played a MUD in one form or another. "Just before the advent of the world wide web, MUDs took up about 11% of the internet's bits," says Richard. "That's the status that they had. There wouldn't have been many people on what would become the internet that wouldn't have tried them at some point, just logged in to see what the fuss was about."

Roy and Richard would continue to work on *MUD1* for a few more years, before becoming restricted by the system and feeling the need for a rewrite, implementing even greater depth to the game's world. "The thing was because the world didn't have enough critical mass of activity," recalls Richard, "we couldn't get the interactivity that we wanted to. It never got snowballed. So when it came to the rewrite, I persuaded Roy that we should make *MUD* into more of a game." *MUD2* –was released in 1985, and would go on to become the benchmark that all other MUDs would later follow. It utilised the same core concepts that they wanted with their virtual world but with greater levels of interactions and sparked a passionate fanbase that lives on to this day.

"I think it was a guy named Jim Aspnes, he wrote *TinyMUD* [in 1989]," says Richard of how MUDs began to shift. "This was *MUD* with all the gameplay taken out, basically. That spawned several other of these 'social worlds', MOOs. The most famous of which was *LambdaMOO* and that was the *Second Life* of its day. There was also *MUCK*, and then there were MUSHs, which were retrofitted to mean Multi-User Shared Hallucinations. So we had these MOOs, MUSHs and MUCKs and they were all used for various role-playing or real-world style applications."

This was the social branch of *MUD* and they, too, began taking

"EVERQUEST WAS PRETTY MUCH DIKUMUD WITH A GRAPHICS ENGINE"

Richard Bartle

» [PC] *World Of Warcraft* may have made the MMO popular, but a lot of its systems came from MUDs.

on a life of their own. The same happened for those that favoured combat as well, with *AberMUD* – named because it came from the University Of Aberystwyth – being released in 1987 before ultimately branching off to America where it really started to take off. It would become a booming industry, growing and evolving throughout the Eighties and early Nineties with a plethora of alternatives. Some players would host their own MUDs, creating their own separate communities. Others would program their own versions, in this way creating spin-offs. Some of these would focus on the social aspect, others on combat or exploration. The range was broad and offered something for every taste, a facet that could even be tied into Richard's taxonomy of player types that he would detail in a thesis paper in 1996.

But it was the Danish that would go on to have the biggest impact on the concept of the MUDs with *DikuMUD*, delivered in 1990 and named after the branch of Copenhagen University that birthed it, Datalogisk Institut Københavns Universitet. The heritage was clearly there, but *D&D* had a big hand in it too and, as such, had a much bigger emphasis on combat as a result. "They fully explored all the concepts that we'd had in the earlier games," says Richard of the design of *DikuMUD*, "took some of them further, dropped some of the others and they formed the basis for MMOs." This focus on combat grabbed a large audience and, from there, the concept would continue to evolve with developers of the Nineties using *DikuMUD* as their inspiration. As computer hardware became more sophisticated, it was clear that the next step was to move beyond text-based gaming to the inevitable. "We knew that there were going to be graphics, but we didn't have graphics," admits Richard. "Trying to do graphics on a Teletype with paper, well no, you can't do that. But we had ideas for it."

But the biggest surprise is perhaps to learn that MUDs can be played today. There are few games that can claim such prestige, but the real honour lies in the underlying design of the game, a thread of which can be traced right back to those earlier dark ages of computing. Graphical MUDs, for example, was a term well known from as early as 1986 with Lucasfilms's release of *Habitat*. While they would all expand on from this, it wasn't until the likes of *Ultima Online* (1997) and *EverQuest* (1999) that the next phase in MUDs would be realised. They had sought to distinguish themselves apart from their inspirations but the heritage was there. "All the major principles involved in *Ultima Online* came from a *MUD* background," says Richard. "*EverQuest* was pretty much *DikuMUD* with a graphics engine. It is a direct line straight down through *DikuMUD*, through *AberMUD* and straight to *MUD*. Likewise *World Of Warcraft* from there." Once *WOW* had set the tone for what was expected from an MMO, everything else since has followed suit. *MUD*'s heritage continues to live on, not only in the running of those original games but in every new virtual world that is released. That's quite a legacy for a 40-plus-year-old text adventure.

» [PC] Many popular fantasy and sci-fi franchises were converted unofficially into MUDs, such as *Discworld* here.

The distinct forms of MUDs that evolved from the original

Hack-and-slash

While not really akin to the hack-and-slash genre that we recognise today, hack-and-slash MUDs are titles that focus on combat above anything else. The combat itself is commonly similar to *D&D*, though it is naturally implemented in a variety of ways across the spectrum of MUDs.

PK MUD

If hack-and-slash is player versus environment, then this is the binary opposite to that. Fewer MUDs allowed for PVP – known as player killing, or 'PK' – but those that did would commonly built up a fanbase. Even fewer games allowed player-killing as the only form of combat, and these titles were known as 'Pure PK'.

Graphical

Due to the limitations of the technology at the time, graphical MUDs are the smallest of the varied categories. Beginning with *Habitat* in 1985, the term wasn't properly used until the likes of *Ultima Online*, *EverQuest* and *RuneScape* made an appearance, at which point it quickly dropped out of use in favour of the more commonly recognised MMORPG.

Role-playing

As you might expect, RP MUDs are favoured by those looking to get into their character. The genre and style of the game typically affects the types of characters that can be created, and some games emphasise role-play over combat while others combine the two together. To this day, it remains an important aspect of virtual worlds, with almost any major MMO launching with role-play-exclusive servers.

Social

This branch of MUDs really puts the gameplay to the background to allow for an environment more suited to interacting with people. It was this range of MUDs that then went on to spawn new terms like MOOs, MUXs and MUSHs, each with their distinct variants. The biggest point of social MUDs was to allow users to create content and share, akin to *Second Life*.

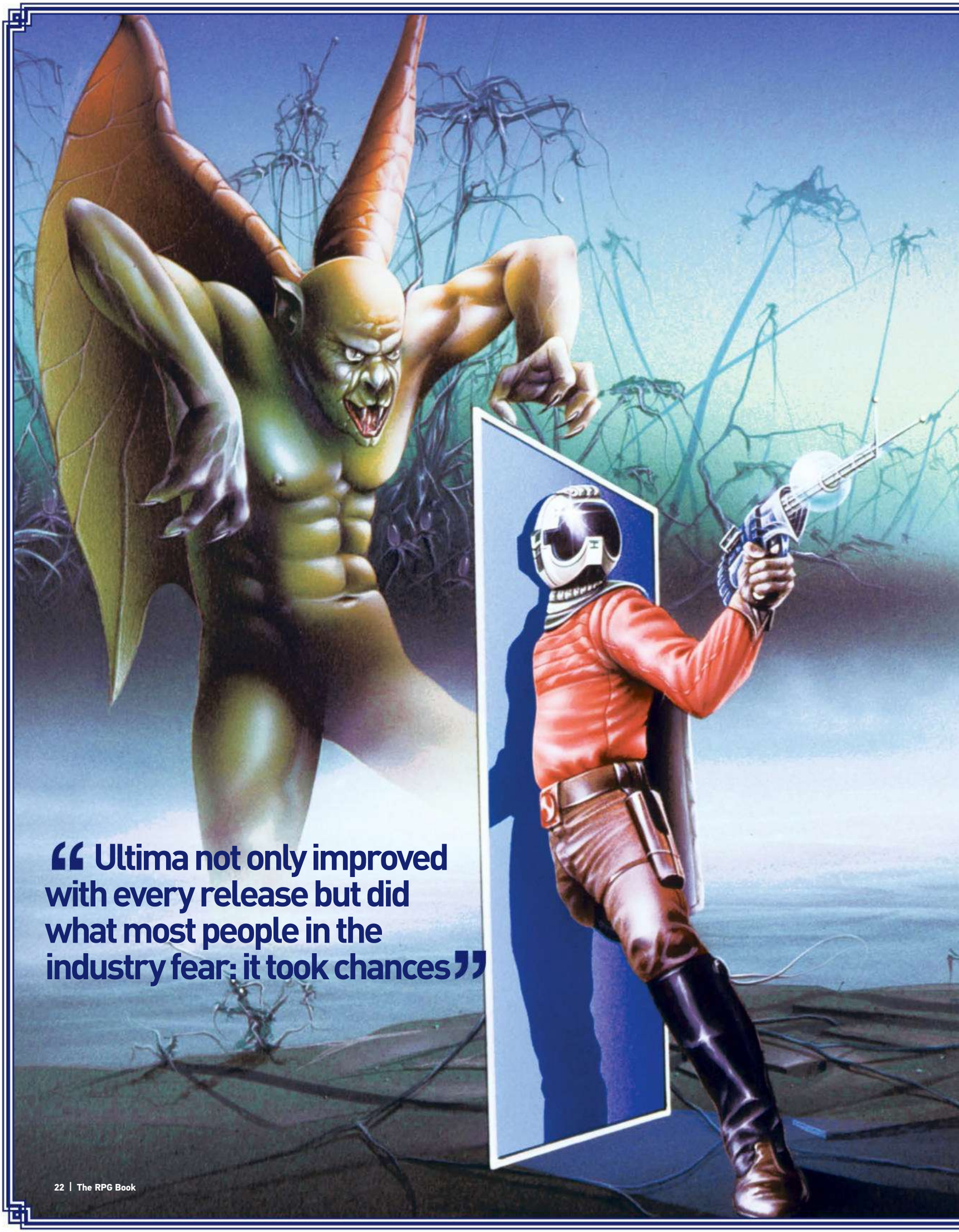
Talker

As an even more specific version of a social MUD, the concept of the 'Talker' shows just how innovative *MUD* was at the time. Talkers stripped away all of the gameplay of *MUD* and only leveraged the chat system. Nowadays we'd simply call them chat rooms, but back then there weren't common tools in place for such communication and this was how players of MUDs retrofit their games to allow for it.

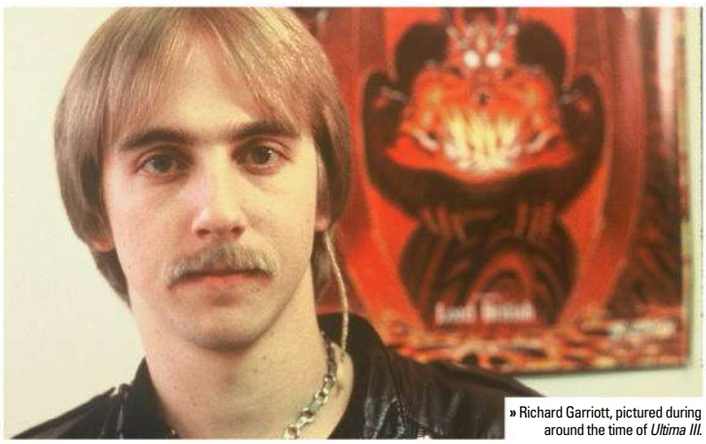
Educational

Taking the constructional nature of MUDs – whereby much of their content can be created by any user with the right privileges – opens the platform as a tool for teaching. A handful of universities and students utilised the code base of varying MUDs for this very purpose, allowing students to learn coding by trying it themselves.

» [PC] *Everquest* was absolutely massive on its release and received countless expansions.



“Ultima not only improved with every release but did what most people in the industry fear: it took chances”



» Richard Garriott, pictured during around the time of *Ultima III*.

The complete History Of Ultima

Arguably the most innovative, most in-depth and, for its time, the most advanced role-playing game series there had ever been, Ultima holds an important place in the gaming hall of fame. We chat to creator Richard Garriott about his epic series

Words by Paul Rigby

The computer role-playing game was – and still is – one of most difficult game genres for any games designer to tackle. This is not a genre that demands that you wobble a marble over a few stepped levels, shoot a selection of dragon heads or kick a football. With a true RPG, the designer is tasked with creating an entire world and making that world believable. Within that world, the designer must forge a living, breathing culture with its own history and traditions and populate that world with a people you can interact with, react to and become a part of. But more than any of that, the designer shouldn't just create a world that actually works, but make it believable, integrating a gripping story that can involve the player and keep them coming back for more. The trick, however, is to achieve all of that without anyone noticing. That is, to give the player freedom**.**

Whether you're talking shoot-'em-ups, beat-'em-ups, puzzles, sports games, strategy and war games, flight sims and even adventure games, each one has a common thread: they take the player's hand and lead them down a pre-programmed path. The role-playing game is the only game genre whose priority is to hide or even remove that path and to present a grand illusion of freedom.

Yet how many role-playing games have ever achieved one or more of the above ingredients? Most have been nothing more than treasure-hunting hack-and-slash fests. Arguably, only one game sailed close to role-playing perfection, and that game quickly flowered into a highly regarded series that not only improved with every new release but did what most people in the industry fear: it took chances. Achieving long ago what George Lucas once hoped to deliver with *Star Wars* – the creation of a trilogy of trilogies – that game is known by one word: *Ultima*.

ULTIMA MINUS ONE

The story began in 1974 when future *Ultima* creator and spaceman Richard Garriott was but a mere whippersnapper of 13. At that time, three major influences arrived in his life. "The first was a copy of the *Lord Of The Rings* book, which was given to me by my sister-in-law," Richard revealed. "Receiving that book was a pivotal movement. Concurrent to that was when I became exposed to the game *Dungeons & Dragons*, which reinforced that interest and desire in medieval fantasy and gaming associated with the subject. Almost concurrent with that was when I discovered computers."

The complete History Of

Ultima

Ultima Characters

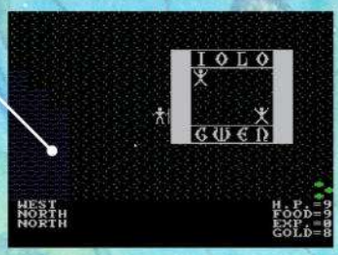
Ultima was packed with memorable characters. Here are just eight to chew on...

AVATAR

The principal player character: you, basically. There's nothing godly about the Avatar – although there are many prophet-like traits – but there is a sense of purity and high moral standing associated with the character as he/she is linked to the essential Virtues. There is debate as to whether the Stranger of the first three *Ultima* games and the Avatar are the same person.

IOLO

One of the Avatar's oldest companions, Iolo first appeared in *Ultima I* as a jester and famous bard in Sosaria and is an old man by the time of the Avatar's last adventure. By *Ultima II* he had taken a wife, Gwenno. Iolo is famed for keeping a talking horse called Smith that is known for its sarcasm and utter failure at providing any useful advice for the current game.

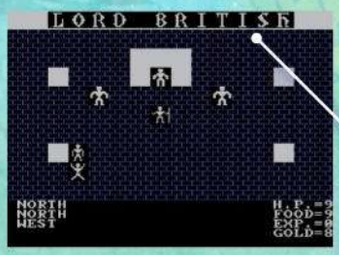


DUPRE

Another of the Avatar's friends and companions, Dupre made their first appearance in *Ultima II*, in a bar on Mars trying to sell a duck – and why not? Dupre is promoted to Paladin status in *Ultima IV* and becomes a mayor in the town of Trinsic. Between the events of *Ultima VI* and *Ultima VII*, Dupre becomes a knight. His final appearance is in *Ultima IX*.

MONDAIN

The principal baddie in *Ultima I*, Mondain was an evil wizard and son of a wizard-king in the city of Akalabeth. After getting up to no good, he was initially defeated by a young chap called British – later called Lord British – and then by the good Lord's champion, the Stranger. Mondain left behind his lover and apprentice, Minax, the evil figure of *Ultima II*.



LORD BRITISH

Lord Cantabrigian British is both the name of the ruler of Britannia, kingdom of the world of Sosaria, and also the nickname of Richard Garriott, who has often played up to the part and been suitably dressed, including in *Ultima Online*. The 'British' part of the nickname stemmed from his English birth while the 'Lord' part stemmed from Garriott's *DND* gaming days.

LORD BLACKTHORN

Blackthorn appears in *Ultima V* to rule the land of Britannia when Lord British, exploring the Underworld, disappears. However, Blackthorn comes under the influence of the Shadowlords and turns into a tyrant, much to the displeasure of the populace. After some fine work by you, the Avatar, he is eventually exiled through a moongate to an unknown world.

DR SPECTOR

Based on the real-life figure of game designer Warren Spector, who worked on *Ultima VI*, *Ultima VII* and *Ultima Underworld*, Dr Johann Spector was a friend of the Avatar's from Earth. We first see the character in *The Savage Empire* where he appears as a corrupt tribal leader, calling himself Zipactriotl, but the Avatar breaks the spell upon him.

CHUCKLES

Lord British's court jester and general nuisance when faced with the Avatar, who is the recipient of Chuckles' riddles and taunts. The character is based on the real-life person of Chuck Bueche, who also enjoys the nickname of Chuckles. Bueche was with Richard Garriott as a founder member of Origin Systems. He created both *2400 AD* and *Autoduel*.

» [PC] *Ultima IX*'s 3D engine was impressive but was left behind by the proliferation of 3D acceleration hardware at the time.

This was 1974, don't forget, so we're not talking PS5s and Nintendo Switches here. In fact, computer technology had yet to integrate keyboards and screens, and the output took the form of a Teletype. Richard's school was in the fortunate position of owning two of them, one of which had an acoustic modem to allow the connection to an off-site computer.

"The school that I went to had no computer programming class at this time, but I had a deep fascination with the machine itself," said Richard. Because I was a good, independent student, the faculty knew that I took on complicated projects and performed very well at them. So, as soon as I discovered this computer, which no one in the school knew how to use in any significant way and there were no classes to teach you how to use it, I asked the school if I could have my own class to learn the computer with no teacher and no curriculum. At the beginning of the semester, I would tell them what I wanted to do on the computer; they'd then review it and approve it. At the end of the semester I would show them my results."

Surely this is every child's dream? Have your own class with no teacher, and make up your own lessons. Apart from anything else, it was a guaranteed way for Richard to get straight As every year throughout his four years at high school. And you know what his projects focused on? Yep: games. In fact, he wrote his first game on a paper tape spool and Teletype. In effect, the game 'world' he created was pre-pre-*Ultima*. *Ultima -1*, in fact.

"I called these games *DND 1, 2, 3,* on up to *28*," he revealed. "They started very small and they became bigger over the four years. But, if you look at the output from these games, they are very obviously the *Ultima* prequels. They used alpha-numeric graphics that would print out on paper, where asterisks were walls, spaces were corridors, dollar signs were treasure, the letter U was an up ladder and D was a down ladder. Using characters for the tile graphics, I was able to create a game that became the foundation of *Akalabeth* that also became the foundation of *Ultima*."

AKALABETH or ULTIMA 0

When the Apple II was released in 1977, Richard eagerly grabbed one. Here was a computer with a keyboard, for goodness' sake, and a video display terminal! His immediate response was to take the same products – the *DND* games that he had formerly created – and move them to the Apple II. Before he committed himself, however, he stumbled over a little game called *Escape*, which proved significantly inspirational.

> **"I asked the school if I could have my own class to learn the computer with no teacher"**

It was a very simple game, produced in low-resolution block graphics. The player was presented with a top-down view of an automatically generated maze, and the game would then drop you in the maze, in 3D. You then had to find your way out. Richard had an epiphany: "When I saw that I thought: 'Hang on, I can do that in my game. Instead of just having a top-down viewpoint in my game, I can also have a 3D viewpoint in the dungeon. Also, instead of having a maze that you wander out of, I can populate it with all my monsters, treasures and so on.'"

Before he launched into the design of the game, Richard took advice from his mother, an artist, on the geometric solutions of drawing perspective and from his father, an astronaut, on the mathematics of integrating perspective within the BASIC programming language. From there, Richard created a long table of commands in order to draw walls, monsters and treasure in a 3D view. That spawned the creation of *Akalabeth*.

"It was actually the owner of a computer store where I worked – a place called Computer Land, in Texas, where I had a summer job as a sales clerk – who thought that this game that I was working on in my spare time for my friends was much better than the software currently on sale in his shop," remembered Richard. "He said, 'Richard, you really ought to publish that.' At that time, my worldly assets amounted to around $200, so I invested in a bunch of zip-lock bags and Xeroxed cover sheets and began to sell them on the store wall. In just a few days, one of them found its way to one of the first national distributors, California Pacific. They called me up with an offer to distribute the game nationally."

They distributed and sold around 30,000 copies of *Akalabeth*. Richard's royalties were about $5 per unit, which totalled a rather tidy $150,000 income – not far off $700,000 in today's climate. And that for a high-school senior for a game that took six weeks of after-school time to develop. The return on the investment was impressive

"It was that success that made me think, 'Gee, if I can have this success with a game that I never intended for the public, then I can do a much better game knowing that it's going to be shown to the public.' That's when I sat down and began to write *Ultima I*."

ULTIMA I

That investment in 3D graphics, which would be used for underground dungeon-exploring combined with top-down 2D graphics for overground exploration, would be a feature of the *Ultima* games and would be a significant difference between its principal contemporary competitor, the *Wizardry* series. The reason was simple: "The entire game of *Wizardry* takes place in a dungeon. In those simplest days, we didn't have 3D hardware to fill in landscape," explained Richard. "To produce an indoor 3D dungeon you can have a simple rectilinear-shaped environment. If you then go outdoors you have to have landscapes, a grid for the covering ground and so on, which requires much more powerful 3D. I wanted to do games that included travel across an entire planet. At the time it was not possible to develop a game with a proper 3D outdoor scene."

Meanwhile, the owner of Richard's initial distributor, California Pacific, encountered financial difficulties, despite the fact that they'd had great success with *Akalabeth* and *Ultima I*. Richard lost money, even with his older brother, Robert, acting as the 'heavy' in a futile attempt to recover it. Distribution was then moved to Online Systems, which later became Sierra Online.

Garriott on Game Design

"Whenever I go to game conferences, I always tell people that the only way to create something that is fresh and unique and consistent and powerful is to truly research the subject thoroughly before jumping to your conclusions about what you should do. I have watched every other game developer that I've ever worked with. When it comes down to saying, 'Okay, it's time to create a magic system, what do you want to do?' They just pop off their first answer and start building it there and then. Sometimes, these guys are just really clever and do a really good job. But, for the majority of the time, they're doing exactly what everyone else has done or are one step away from that or just correcting a minor problem in the last game that they thought was cool. As a rule, they are not doing anything new and fresh enough to be noteworthy."

» The games' massive maps became a hallmark of the *Ultima* series.

"I moved there because most of my contemporaries, in those early days, were developing simple little coin-op knock-offs such as *Asteroids* and *Pac-Man*. My games were already much bigger and more detailed than those products, so I wanted my games in a box with big fictional manuals and cloth maps. Most publishers said 'Thanks but no thanks. That's way too expensive.' Sierra was the only company who would agree to what I would call my demands. So I then moved *Ultima II* to Sierra."

Like *Akalabeth*, *Ultima I* was written in BASIC. It was at this point that Richard decided to move onwards from this relatively primitive language. He decided to learn assembly language for his next title: *Ultima II*.

ULTIMA II

However, real life got in the way again. Sierra began to suffer from financial problems and it stopped paying Richard. Brother Robert was asked to pay it a visit but, again, walked away empty-handed. It was at this point that Robert confronted Richard: "Look, Richard. Why don't we start our own company together? I'll run the business, you make the games, and I promise you that when we sell the game, the first person we will pay is you," he said. That was how the Garriott brothers' company, Origin, began.

On the programming and game engine side, *Ultima II* was far more powerful than *Ultima I* but, because it was his first time writing anything in assembly language, it was not what Richard would call "well-written".

ULTIMA III

"I said to myself, 'Now I know all about assembly language, I can scrap *Ultima II* and build a much better game.' Hence, *Ultima III* became a re-write of the underlying structures as I gained in skill as a technical game developer," said Richard.

At this point, the ongoing competition with the *Wizardry* series bears a revisit. In unit terms, *Wizardry* outsold *Ultima II*. However, *Wizardry II* didn't evolve and

appealed to a subset of the *Wizardry* fans because the same engine was used, while *Ultima II* was written in a faster language. "Just for reasons of personal learning, I got into the habit of pulling away the codebase of the previous game and starting entirely from scratch, which maximised the forward innovation. So, each *Ultima* really was better than its predecessor. Therefore, each *Ultima* outsold its predecessor – 50 per cent or better, in fact. Very quickly, the *Ultima* games outsold the competition."

ULTIMA IV

By the time *Ultima IV* was in development, Richard felt that he really understood what was required to create a game. Hence, the technical challenge of making a game wasn't the hard part.

"*Ultima IV* was when I sat down and said, 'Well, now I know how to make a game, what do I really want to accomplish with it? What would make a meaningful and good game that offers something more – more than larger monsters and ever bigger treasures, at any rate?' This was the first time that I considered the content of the game. A game that was much more personally meaningful. A game that had virtues in it as opposed to allowing players to play however they wanted. To encourage a degree of behaviour that, if they didn't live by the rules, the behaviour that I espouse in the game, they wouldn't be able to win the game. It was a far more sophisticated game on the inside."

It was risky, however. While writing it, Richard wasn't sure that people would like it. Doubts arose. Then he heard that, upon completing the earlier *Ultima* games, some players returned to kill and slaughter all the 'goodies' in the game. Okay, fun was being had but, "Here we had people operating like the bad guy and still winning. Hence, I thought it would be far more interesting to create a game where the world reacted logically to your actions. But because I knew that I would be taking away from people the method by which all of these people where having fun, I thought that there was a significant chance that it would backfire; that the players would be unhappy that they could no longer pillage and plunder."

Creating the earlier games had taken just a few months; *Ultima IV* took almost two years to create. "I laboured over that game, in the face of heavy criticism that I always took too long to develop games. *Ultima IV* flew in the face of people who shouted, 'Crank it out, Richard! Crank it out!' I said, 'No, it's got to be right or there's no point in doing it.'"

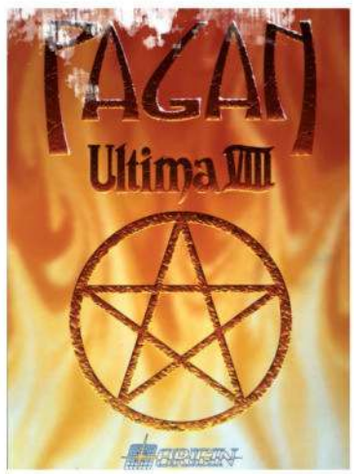
When it was published, Richard was relieved to see that it had outsold the previous *Ultima* games by a giant margin. In fact, *Ultima IV* was the first number one bestselling game in the series. It put *Ultima* on the map.

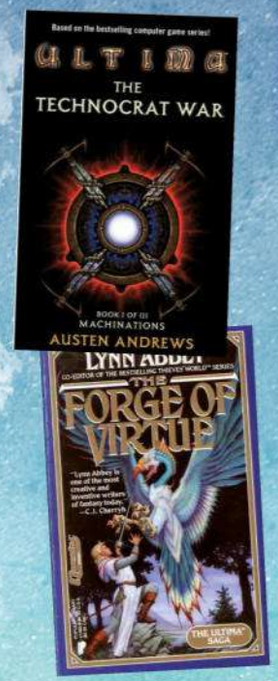
ULTIMA V

Ultima IV was well-received, which developed the philosophy and morality of 'character'. "With *Ultima V*, I wanted to create a game that was not so black and white. In the real world, it's not obvious who the good guys and bad guys are. In fact, there are people who are really not one way or the other. There are people who are down and out and involved in illegal behaviour, who are fundamentally

"Ultima's initial distributor, California Pacific, was sunk by the owner's drug habit"

» After completing 28 *D&D* games at school, graduation would move Richard on to the creation of *Akalabeth*.





Novels & comics

Ultima even sparked its own series of novels and Japanese comics.

Written by Lynn Abbey, *The Ultima Saga* lasted for two titles and was set in between *Ultima III* and *Ultima IV* before coming to an end. The books tended to feature the people of Britannia rather than retelling the computer game stories and included *The Forge Of Virtue* (1991) and *The Temper Of Wisdom* (1992), while a concurrent series was written by Austen Andrews called *Ultima: The Technocrat War* that included *Machinations* (2001), *Masquerade* (2002) and *Maelstrom* (2002). The books are based on the history created for the cancelled online MMORPG *Ultima Worlds Online: Origin*, which diverges from the history of the single-player *Ultima* games just after *Ultima I*. Three Japanese comics were also created. They were *Ultima: EXODUS No Kyoufu* (*The Terror Of EXODUS*), adapted from *Ultima III*; *Ultima: Quest Of The Avatar*, adapted from *Ultima IV*; and *Ultima: Magincia No Metsubou* (*The Fall Of Magincia*), adapted from *Ultima V*.

Richard The Spaceman

Since leaving the computer games industry, Richard Garriott's thoughts have wandered to higher things – several miles higher, actually, as he emulated his father, becoming an astronaut via the Russian Space Agency. Launching into space via a Russian rocket did have its own practical problems, however.

"As you might imagine," said Garriott, "every surface of the space craft is full of instruments, all of which are critical to operation and life support, and so, at the very least, I needed to understand what every button, knob, lever and control did. Also, the Soyuz rocket, Soyuz MA13, is labelled entirely in Russian, all the data manuals are in Russian and all the commands from Command Control are in Russian – so I had to learn Russian. After two days of flight we docked with the International Space Station where I lived for ten more days, then I returned in yet another rocket, the Soyuz TMA-12."

» Yes, Richard Garriott was actually in this particular rocket, racing to space.

The complete History Of

Ultima

The Ultima Timeline

ULTIMA I: THE FIRST AGE OF DARKNESS (1980)

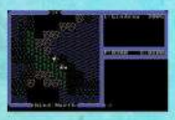
The first game in the *Ultima* saga. The game surrounds chief baddy, Mondain the wizard, who is using the Gem Of Immortality to enslave the lands of Sosaria.

ULTIMA II: THE REVENGE OF THE ENCHANTRESS (1982)

Mondain's lover, Minax, is threatening Earth. You must search through space and time to hunt down the evil enchantress in Castle Shadowguard and destroy her.

ULTIMA III: EXODUS (1983)

Your task here is to destroy the final relics of Mondain and Minax. This was the first game to move to a party of characters. In addition, battles occurred against several enemies on a new battle screen.



ULTIMA IV: QUEST OF THE AVATAR (1985)

You wander the land of Britannia, under the rule of Lord British. The game calls for a spiritual leader and sets a quest to achieve and understand the eight Virtues.

ULTIMA V: WARRIORS OF DESTINY (1988)

Lord Blackthorn has taken the throne of Britannia and three Shadowlords roam the land while the eight Virtues have been interpreted in a much stricter fashion.

ULTIMA VI: THE FALSE PROPHET (1990)

The shrines of Virtue have been captured, and you have to rescue Britannia from the invaders. The game introduced a single scale for the whole map.

ULTIMA VII: THE BLACK GATE (1992)

Along with the other parts of *Ultima VII*, this was arguably the best, the high point technically, design-wise and via content. The game system featured a more free-form map with stackable items.

ULTIMA VII: FORGE OF VIRTUE (EXPANSION PACK) (1993)

In this add-on, the Avatar has to pass a variety of tests to destroy the last vestiges of Exodus. To do that he has to reconsider the principles of Truth, Love and Courage.

ULTIMA VII PART TWO: SERPENT ISLE (1993)

The Warriors of Destiny chase Batlin and stumble across a new land in the first game set outside Britannia since *Ultima III*. It is far more linear in structure.

ULTIMA VII PART TWO: THE SILVER SEED (EXPANSION PACK) (1993)

Your group goes beneath the Serpent Isle. This expansion feels rushed and doesn't conclude properly. It was featured in later issues of *Ultima VII*.

ULTIMA VIII: PAGAN (1994)

After the Elemental Titans usurp the evil Destroyer, the Titans decide to impose themselves on the populace, becoming equally cruel rulers. You have to defeat the Titans to free the people.

ULTIMA IX: ASCENSION (1999)

Created among the dying throes of Origin Systems when infighting caused many of the designers to leave and Garriott had to take over the project to rescue it from oblivion. Check out the useful fan patches.

» [PC] *Ultima VII* was divided in two to allow Garriott to start work on *VIII* while his team finished the story of *VII*.

> **"Ultima VI's gargoyles are a fully realised race with art and culture, language and value"**

good people but just on the wrong path. With *Ultima V*, I decided that I wanted more subtlety to the presentation."

ULTIMA VI

Richard is particularly fond of the primary story twist in *Ultima VI*. Being called the False Prophet, the box cover shows the Avatar standing on the chest of a gargoyle. The opening of the game features gargoyles invading Earth and capturing you and some of your friends while killing innocent bystanders. You are set up at the beginning of that game to clearly believe that you are the good guy – you always have been – and that the evil-looking gargoyles perpetrating these evil acts are the bad guys… and let's go save the world. The storyline for *Ultima VI* is quite different from that. You discover that the gargoyles are not evil. The gargoyles are a fully realised race with art and culture, language and value. "With these middle *Ultimas*, I, in my mind, reflected contemporary issues I saw in the world. It's happening today. Look at the religiously based conflicts happening right now – much of which, to my mind, is occurring due to ignorance, fear and mistrust."

Technically, the *Ultima* series improved hugely. Take the graphic quality as a gauge: if you examine *Ultima I*, you'll see that it featured tile graphics – 16 in all. With *Ultima II*, there were 32, while *Ultima III* had 64. By the time you get to 64 you get to the point where you can include furniture and more. When the total rises to 128, Richard could put letters in those tiles to spell out the names of shops. With 512 tiles, Richard was able to grow 3D tiles out of the 2D plane. The resolution was now becoming high enough that the game became three-dimensional.

ULTIMA VII

The time between *Ultima VI* and *Ultima VII* formed a natural break. If you look at the first three games they presented 'Richard Garriott learns how to program'. There wasn't much of a story in any of them. *Ultima IV*, *Ultima V* and *Ultima VI*, however, presented 'Richard Garriott learns how to write and present a story'. "There was no pre-planning with *Ultima Ultima IV*, *Ultima V* and *Ultima VI*. In those early days, I never knew if there was going to be another *Ultima*."

Ultima VII was where Richard decided to plan a trilogy; to create characters and an ambience because he knew that there was going to be an *Ultima VIII* and a *Ultima IX*. He had to create an arc that would continue, along with a character. A game that would be forward-looking, not, like *Ultima IV*, *Ultima V* and *Ultima VI*, gazing into the past. That's when Richard invented The Guardian: a bad guy for *Ultima VII*, *Ultima VIII* and *Ultima IX* and a story to run alongside.

» The cloth map for *Ultima V*.

Ultima The Spin-offs

A number of *Ultima* 'associates' were released under the *Ultima* label that ran alongside the main game world as opposed to being part of the principal storyline. *The Worlds Of Ultima* was one successful line that featured both *The Savage Empire* and *Martian Dreams* and utilised the *Ultima VI* engine. *The Savage Empire*, released in 1990, was set in a fictional world that resembled that of Arthur Conan Doyle's *The Lost World*, while *Martian Dreams*, released a year later, was a tenuous sequel to *The Savage Empire* and was broadly similar in plot to *The Martian Chronicles*, a book written by Ray Bradbury.

Ultima Underworld spawned two individual titles of its own. As first-person titles, developed by Blue Sky, which would later evolve into Looking Glass, the games were labelled as 'non-linear' to preserve the more 'mature' outlook of the *Ultima* series. Set in Britannia, the first title, *The Stygian Abyss* (1992) involved a plot surrounding a kidnapping and subsequent rescue attempt. *Ultima Underworld II: Labyrinth Of Worlds* (1993), explored the plotline of *Ultima VII*, slotting in between *Ultima VII* and *Part Two*.

Additional *Ultima* games also include two that were exclusively made for the Game Boy under the title of *Ultima: Runes Of Virtue* (1991) and *Runes Of Virtue II* (1994). As you may expect, neither of these games are part of the main *Ultima* series and are biased towards action and puzzle-solving.

Finally, a much-anticipated expansion pack for *Ultima VIII*, entitled *The Lost Vale*, was planned but was never released.

"The system was, again, created from scratch. *Ultima VII* was divided into two. With *Ultima VII Part Two*, you see the company saying, 'Richard, these games are taking you so long. We can't really wait for you to create the next game. There's no product in the meantime. So, while you start the development of the next one, which requires a fairly small team, why don't you let the rest of the team finish *Ultima VII*, in order to keep a product flow to keep the public interested?' Hence, *Ultima VII Part Two* was an outgrowth of a financial strategy."

ULTIMA VIII

While the company was working on *Ultima VII Part Two*, Richard began working on *Ultima VIII*. For the very first time, however, all was not well. Until that point, the *Ultima* game system itself was rock solid. One of the proudest achievements of the *Ultima* series, to that point, was the lack of any bugs: "I will cast blame beyond myself for that one. *Ultima VII* was the last game I published independently as Origin; *Ultima VIII* was the first game I published as part of Electronic Arts. EA believed devoutly and showed great graphs that the release date was far more important than content and they pushed everyone to that belief. Hence, *Ultima VIII* was the first and only *Ultima* that ever shipped on time. However, to make it ship on time we had to continually cut back, cut back, cut back. As much as I like to blame the publisher, to be fair, they convinced me. They didn't chain me to the desk and make me do it. They convinced me; I went along with it."

The game suffered. Hence, if the designers worked on an objective that they wanted to accomplish in the game, they would get halfway through it and then realise that there was no way that they could finish in the allotted time, so features began to be dropped. *Ultima VIII* was the first *Ultima* game where the map that comes in the box has nothing to do with the actual game you play, because much of that has been cut out too. Also, the storyline doesn't make much sense because much of that was cut. Frankly, *Ultima VIII* was buggy and lacked refinement.

"If you look at *Diablo*, which became very popular, *Ultima VIII*'s technology fundamentally was *Diablo* in the sense of how you moved and how you fought. *Ultima VIII* was well before *Diablo*; it's just that *Diablo* followed it correctly."

ULTIMA IX

Ultima IX, the final game in the trilogy, the final game in the trilogy of trilogies, and the last ever single-platform *Ultima* to be released, was actually developed alongside the *Ultima Online* project. At first, no one in the world was interested in *Ultima Online*, and no one had any real belief in the concept. Richard, in fact, had a problem getting it started: "Once we started running the beta test and more people joined, the tables were reversed. I was then told that I should stop *Ultima IX* and devote myself solely to *Ultima Online*. I said, 'Screw you!'

"*Ultima IX* only made it to publication because I wouldn't let it die. I wanted to finish my trilogy of trilogies. However, I had virtually no support from the company. It eventually came out, but only via sheer personal willpower. It's a game that I'm fairly happy with because I finished it in my way. However, it had little corporate support so it was still shy of its goal… but was still pretty good."

Ultima, along with its spin-off games and console variants, proved to be one of the most long-lasting and beloved of all computer titles that pushed the envelope of what was possible in an RPG. Exploring language, philosophy and morals, it also proved that games don't have to be targeted towards the lowest common denominator to be popular.

Richard left the industry to pursue other life goals, however he returned in 2013 to announce *Shroud Of The Avatar: Forsaken Virtues*, a spiritual successor to Ultima that released in 2018. It seems Lord British isn't done with videogames just yet, and we're keen to see what he has in store for the future. ✱

RPG History

1980s

How transitioning away from text took computer RPGs from the mainframes to the mainstream of gaming

Words by Nick Thorpe

At the dawn of the Eighties, the computer role-playing game was still very much in its infancy. Games like *Temple Of Apshai* had existed for just mere months, meaning that graphical RPGs were still a rather new concept. While text-based adventures would continue to be popular for some time afterwards, the pull of these graphical role-players could not be denied – games like *Ultima* and *Wizardry* proved that with what were hugely impressive sales figures for the time.

As computers became more powerful and more widely owned, the genre opened up. Sir-Tech and Origin Systems were able to expand *Wizardry* and *Ultima* with sequels, incorporating improved graphics and better plots, but new challengers appeared too. Interplay Productions created classics such as *The Bard's Tale* and *Wasteland* for Electronic Arts, while Strategic Simulations Inc (SSI) switched from wargames to show that the intricacies of tabletop *Dungeons & Dragons* could successfully be replicated on computers through its *Gold Box* series. By the end of the Eighties, computer role-playing games were a truly compelling alternative to pen-and-paper offerings.

On the other side of the Pacific, Japanese developers and players were falling in love with western RPGs too, but altogether different traditions soon began to emerge from those inspirations. The action-RPG was one particular innovation, abandoning turn-based actions for real-time play. The Apple II game *Caverns Of Freitag* by David Shapiro would influence Falcom's *Dragon Slayer*, which emerged alongside the likes of *Courageous Perseus* and *Hydlide* as early proponents of the style. Though Japanese home computer games were rarely translated for western computers, console games like *The Legend Of Zelda* and the *Ys* series would popularise the style internationally.

Even with the more traditional turn-based RPGs, Japanese companies had their own style, retaining mechanical aspects like experience points, equipment and inventories while dispensing with the freedom to define your character. By the end of the decade, Japanese RPGs had adopted their now-standard template of allowing the player to control characters that were already fully defined, with their own stories and attributes. With translation efforts still in their infancy at that stage, few outside of Japan noticed – but it wouldn't be long before they did. ✱

GAMES THAT DEFINED THE DECADE

1) 4 SKELETONS (4)
BENJ'S OPTIONS
F)IGHT S)PELL P)ARRY
R)UN U)SE
CHARACTER NAME CLASS AC HITS STA
1 FREJA C-PIG -1 168
2 NEVE N-MAG 7 252
3 RICHARD N-SAM 10 173

1981
Wizardry: Proving Grounds Of The Mad Overlord

This Apple II dungeon-crawler differentiated itself from its peers with its graphics, comprising mostly of a first-person view and various monsters. Though far from replicating the depth of tabletop RPGs, it was one of the very first commercially successful computer RPGs and was internationally influential.

1984
Dragon Slayer

This early action-RPG by Falcom was a hit on a variety of Japanese home computers, thanks to its then-unusual blend of dungeon crawling and real-time action. The company quickly doubled down with sequels to create one of the first Japanese role-playing game franchises, and many of these sequels became series themselves – such as *Xanadu* and *The Legend Of Heroes*.

1985
Ultima IV: Quest Of The Avatar

Though *Ultima III: Exodus* is considered to be the first true modern computer RPG, the fourth game improved things with a larger world and better writing. However, the most striking feature was that players were presented with ethical dilemmas and could come to regret taking situationally expedient but ultimately immoral actions.

1985
The Bard's Tale

Michael Cranford's opus instantly made Interplay Productions into a force within the RPG market. If you could survive the notoriously difficult opening, *The Bard's Tale* was one of the more accessible RPGs of its day, and Skara Brae gave a sense of place that few of the game's competitors could match. The series grew both with and without Michael's input, who left after the second game.

1986
The Legend Of Zelda

Nintendo's hit action-RPG series began here, and it was a memorable experience for many players because of the sheer freedom you had to explore. There was no hand-holding, just Link, a large world and a princess that needed to be rescued from an evil Ganon. Many NES owners had never played anything like it, and its legacy and impact on videogaming continues today.

1986
Dragon Quest

Dragon Quest's streamlined mechanics and appealing character designs by *Dragon Ball* creator Akira Toriyama gave it a wide appeal, and it became a national phenomenon in Japan. Japanese RPGs simply wouldn't be what they are today without Chunsoft's hit, which inspired the creation of *Final Fantasy*, *Phantasy Star*, *Ys* and others.

1987
Phantasy Star

Sega's sci-fi and fantasy epic dazzled Master System owners with smoothly animated 3D dungeons, interesting characters and a sprawling quest that took place across three planets. It was also one of the earliest Japanese role-playing games to be translated into English, helping to drive the popularity of the genre amongst console owners.

1987
Dungeon Master

The power of 16-bit computers was ably demonstrated by this first-person dungeon crawler, which was visually superior to many of its contemporaries. It was more than just a pretty game, though, with innovative approaches to combat and inventory management that influenced later games such as *Eye Of The Beholder*.

1988
Pool Of Radiance

This licensed *Advanced Dungeons & Dragons* game wasn't just a hit for SSI – its strategy guide alone sold more copies than any of the company's previous games. The first in the renowned *Gold Box* series, this game faithfully implemented the rules of the massively popular tabletop phenomenon – a huge achievement at the time.

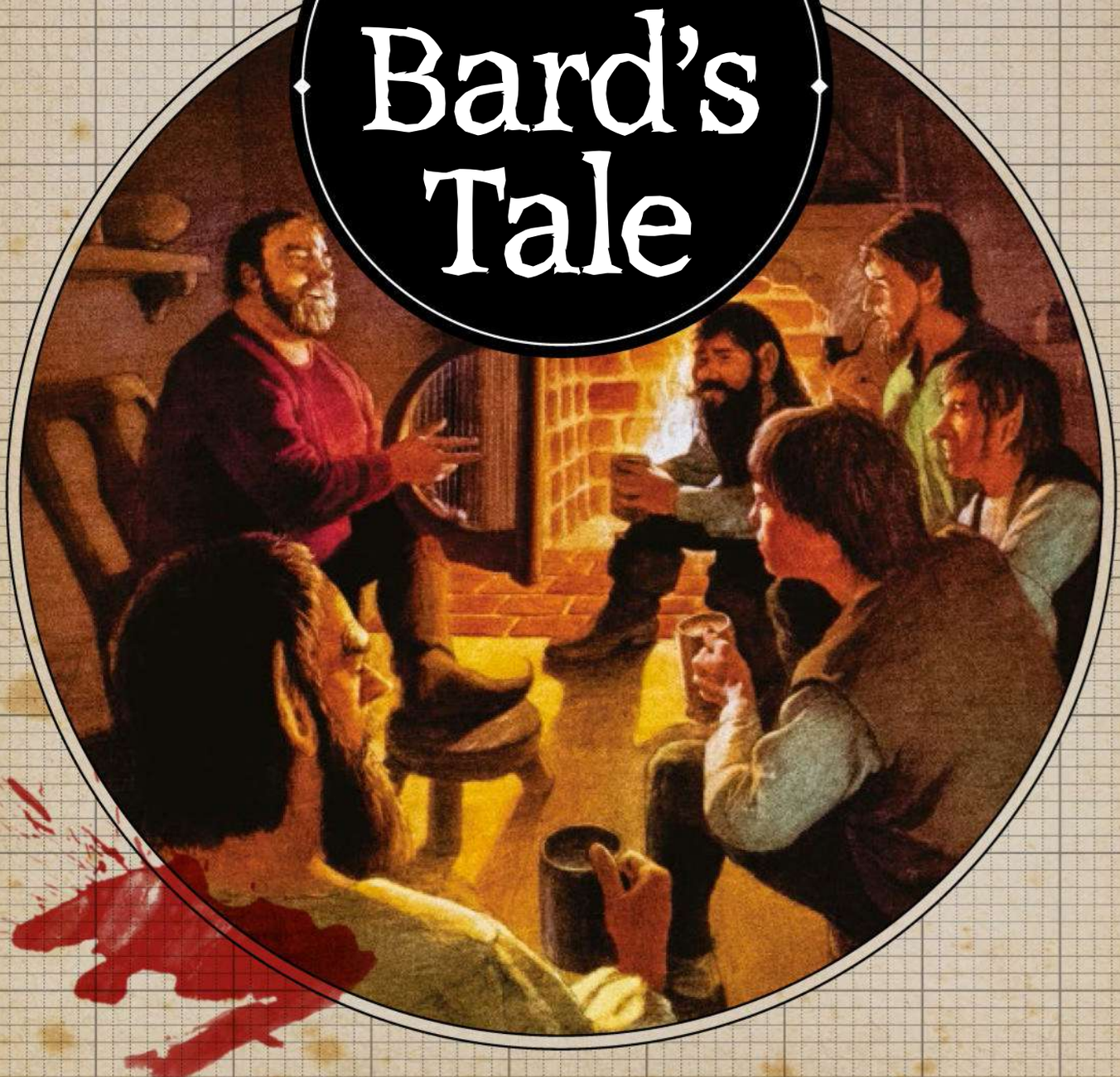
Feena
I'm glad that you are safe. Jeva told me that I could stay with her for a while.
H.P 060/060 EXP 00766/00900 GOLD 06155
PLAYER
ENEMY

1989
Ys Book I & II

Falcom's action-RPG had been a hit prior to its arrival on the PC Engine thanks to its satisfying combat, but this enhanced version was a feast for the senses. Voice acting and animated cutscenes showed off the power of the console's CD-ROM expansion, providing a tantalising glimpse of future delights. Today, the *Ys* series has celebrated nine entries.

The History of

The Bard's Tale



As one of the most popular RPGs of its time, the story of The Bard's Tale's was at risk of being forever lost to history. Let's recount how this beloved series came to be, and how it made its return

Countless are the times the industry has witnessed the effect that a single game can have. Genres have been born, franchises have been made and, as with so many cases, companies have thrust themselves into the halls of fame. *The Bard's Tale* was one such title, a game that was born from the desire to simply improve on what had come before but ended up becoming a huge success for Interplay. Here was a company working on smaller games, a handful of work-for-hire programmers working on conversions, its own original creations not coming until months after its inception. After striking a deal with Activision, however, its fortunes quickly picked up, and Interplay would set to work on three text adventures. This gave the company enough of a financial backing to also work on its own original games and while it would set off to work on developing the likes of *Borrowed Time* and *Mindshadow* for Activision – games that would be built on the work done by Interplay founder Brian Fargo's own *Demon's Forge* years earlier – it would also set about creating its first RPG. This, it turns out, would become *The Bard's Tale*.

Interplay knew it had the skills to make something special, and having seen the likes of the popular RPG *Wizardry* it wanted to approach that same gameplay in a much improved fashion. Though *Wizardry* had made a name for itself among RPG fans, its earliest titles weren't all that much to look at; wireframe dungeons and reams of text and numbers meant it was a difficult game for anyone but the most persistent to enjoy. "Growing up, I spent much of my time playing *D&D*," says Brian Fargo of *The Bard's Tale*'s inspiration, "some of my best memories were from the hours we would play. *Wizardry* was a major influence and set the bar for how deep and interesting you could simulate crawling around in dungeons, looting and fighting monsters." Brian adds that Interplay's main goal for the RPG was to "bring a graphical and musical upgrade to the genre". Enter Michael Cranford, a friend of Brian's who had created a demo of a character walking around a 3D town – in the same way we now recognise as navigating *The Bard's Tale*'s Skara Brae. Under the working name of *Spectre Snare*, Brian agreed to let Michael work on his *Wizardry*-style RPG as an independent contractor – under Michael's stipulation that the game would remain under his control.

"Mike Cranford did not want to be an employee," states Rebecca Heineman, one of the key early employees at Interplay, "he just wanted to be a contractor. He started working on it but Mike ran into some problems technically, so I came in and I helped. ▶

You're in an empty building.
Empty building
(EXIT)
Character Name AC Hit Cnd SpPt Cl
MIRACULIX -9 228 228 263 Wi
MERLIN -8 190 190 189 Wi
OBELIX LO 141 141 0 Mo
TROUBADIX -8 OLD 208 0 Ba
AVALON -8 239 239 296 Wi
DR.STRANGE 1 DEAD 2 0 Ro
"Talk ain't cheap," the backeep says. How much will you tip him?
3
"There's a building in Skara Brae where some of the survivors stashed their goods. It may be helpful," smiles the bartender
Scrapwood
CHARACTER AC HIT PTS SPL PTS CL
1 MIDNIGHT -5 634 634 604 487 Ar
2 HOLY WARRIOR -28 495 495 0 0 Mo
3 FELIX 7 67 67 0 0 Ba
4 LINA THE QUICK -6 243 243 0 0 Wi
5 GARET JAX -15 *** *** 0 0 Pa
6 RIBALD 9 37 37 34 28 Co
7 SILVERHIND 4 55 55 0 0 Mo
Alas, your party has expired, but has gone to adventurer heaven.
(CONTINUE)
Sorry, bud
CHARACTER AC HIT PTS SPL PTS CL
1 SIR GRADY 5 DEAD 0 0 0 Ro
2 MURPH 10 DEAD 0 13 4 Ma
3 MARKUS 4 DEAD 0 0 0 Ba
4 LIL CID 4 DEAD 0 0 0 Wa
5 OMAR 10 DEAD 0 14 8 Ma
6 HAKE 10 DEAD 0 0 0 Pr
7 BRIAN THE FIST 4 DEAD 0 0 0 Pr

» [Atari ST] The Atari ST and the Apple IIGS versions of the games had the best art, and stood out among their contemporaries.

» [PC] The third *Bard's Tale* game placed an emphasis on story, with plenty of dialogue and characters to meet.

» [PC] The first two *Bard's Tale* games were notorious for their difficulty, especially the second one.

THE BARD'S TALE 101

■ All three *Bard's Tale* games, the fourth that would become *Dragon Wars*, and even the new Kickstarted game all offer the same core experience divided into two parts: exploration from first-person viewpoint and turn-based party combat. The dungeons followed a similar pattern, though would sometimes involve puzzles to solve or difficult environments to overcome.

» Brian Fargo is an RPG veteran and avid fan of the genre.

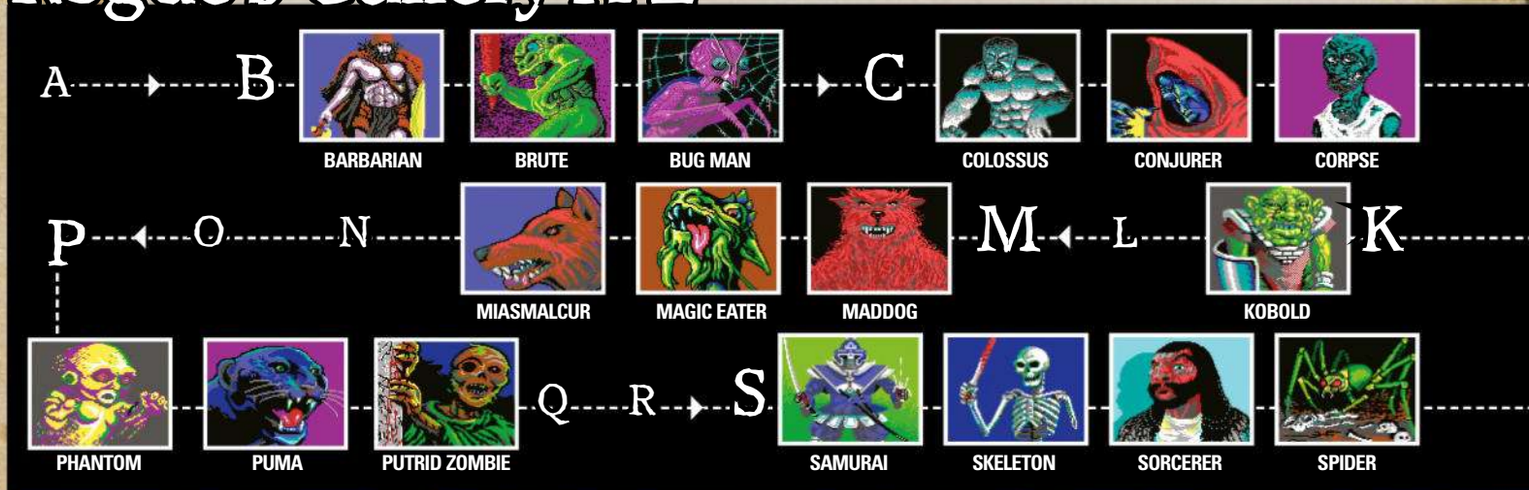
The Bard's Tale
Hail, travelers! Step to the bar and I'll draw you a tankard.
You can:
(O)rder a drink
(T)alk to barkeep
(E)xit the tavern
Scarlet Bard
Character Name AC Hits Cond SpPt Cl
1) EPSILON 8 18 G 0 Ha
2) GANDALF 7 234 G 66 Ma
3) LEGOLAS 7 234 G 78 Ma
4) ALFAR -7 234 G 0 No
5) ARAGORN 0 Dead G 0 Pa
6) DELTA 10 Dead 14 6 Co

» [Apple II] *The Bard's Tale* was a difficult game, as much for the various monsters you'll battle as the confusion over the game's direction. Exploration was key.

▶ At the time, I was writing *Borrowed Time*, I believe; then I was the one at Interplay that was writing all the games. I wrote *Mindshadow, Borrowed Time, Tass Times In Tonetown* and that technology that I used for the graphic rendering ended up in *Bard's Tale*." Rebecca adds that much of her work on *The Bard's Tale*'s earliest games were more behind-the-scenes elements, features such as the art tools, the graphics engines and the disc drivers.

"The major impetus behind *Bard's Tale*," states Brian, "was to make sure that we brought the world to life as best we could. Even though the simple animation on the portraits was small, it gave it a certain charm that people really loved. And we knew we wanted music so integrating a Bard made perfect sense." That Bard character became an integral part of the gameplay, too, a facet that helped the transition from the original working title of *Shadow Snare* to *The Bard's Tale*. The inclusion of music brought a whole new level of quality to the RPG, but more than that, the Bard could enact a set of unique spells that would assist the party. These would enable buffs that could affect the game in some way, from improving your group's damage or defence, healing their wounds or even lighting dark dungeons so you can find your way. It was a totally new concept that empowered the player, and gave the game a much greater sense of depth to its combat system. *The Bard's Tale* would release in 1985, published by Electronic Arts for the Apple II and was met with incredible critical and commercial success. Rebecca, who knew the game's code inside out, was then put to work on its ports, and the game would also be released on a number of systems, from DOS PCs and Amiga to the C64, ZX Spectrum and even the NES.

Rogue's Gallery A-Z



This success of *The Bard's Tale* made it Interplay's first number-one hit, and it really helped put the company on the map. With the release of this one game, Interplay could afford to expand, taking on more developers, starting more projects of its own and even publishing the creations of other developers, too. Yet even before the company's boom that came with the release of *The Bard's Tale*, a sequel was already being planned. But there was a problem; *The Bard's Tale*'s development hadn't been a totally smooth process, and because of personnel rather than any particular development worries. Its designer, Michael Cranford, became frustrated with Rebecca's input in the game, and the two would clash over design elements, ranging from the game's difficulty – which it later became notorious for – to the exclusion of playable female characters. As a result, the working relationship between the two and Interplay became so fraught that, according to Rebecca, Mike doubled down on his stipulation for creative control and secured a contract for the second game that gave the developer exactly what he wanted.

"The contract that was signed was one where it gave Mike a carte blanche to do whatever he wanted with the sequel," remembers Rebecca. "It's his game, nobody had any extra involvement, nobody got to say anything about the game." And so a sequel went ahead, Mike would make the role-playing game that he wanted, with little input from anyone else.

Though the sequel would use the same graphical engine as its predecessor, many more features would be added to the core design. "I know that Mike really wanted to expand on the classes and have the outdoors be part of the experience," claims Brian. "In the first game, you were either in Skara Brae, a dungeon or a tower so it felt fairly constrained and he wanted a broader sense of a world. And Mike really ramped up the difficulty a bit with his game by introducing these real-time events that had to be solved. Bigger and harder seemed to driving mantra there." And it was true: if the first game was difficult, then it didn't hold a candle to the sequel. "This is how he told me, years ago," adds Rebecca, "it was that he believes that the Dungeon Master [in games like *Dungeons & Dragons*] is a player – and if the party is all killed then the Dungeon Master wins. And he took this glee in killing off the party. Well, he took that a little bit into his games as well, in that he thinks that if a person plays his game and that person gets killed then he's like, 'I win!'"

> "Wizardry was a major influence and set the bar for how deep and interesting you could simulate crawling around in dungeons"
> Brian Fargo

The Bard's Tale
THORIN
Race: Dwarf
Class: Hunter
St:18 IQ:13 Dx:14
Cn:16 LK: 9
Lvl:1 SpPt:0
Exper: 20
Gold: 0
Press Any Key...
Skara Brae
Character Name AC Hits Cond SpPt Cl
S> GANDALF -9 8 8 12 Co
1> MORGAIST -9 207 207 0 Wa
2> ALLAMON -3 16 16 20 Ma
3> BALIN -3 18 18 0 Pa
4> GLORFINDEL 9 13 13 0 Ba
5> THORIN 2 14 14 0 Hu

» [Commodore 64] Different versions of the game also had unique enemies appearing when exploring, making some easier early on than others.

Elements such as real-time puzzles – that required a solution to be discovered before one or all of the party was killed – added a new level of tension and challenge to the game. Other puzzles required entering passwords that could only be learnt in certain parts of the map, and without that information you couldn't proceed. Combat was expanded, too, and led to the addition of ranged combat, many more magic spells, bard songs and even the ability to summon extra beasts to assist the party. Mike was religious, too, and rather than set the game in Skara Brae – as was the case with the previous game – named each of the game's cities after locations in the New Testament. *The Bard's Tale II: The Destiny Knight* released for Apple II a year after the original, in 1986. Though its sales proved equally as popular as the predecessor, its critical success was varied – some praised the new additions, while others

» [Atari ST] Loading screens are a staple of retro gamer, and the vivid artwork here helped set the fantasy tone for the player.

» [Apple IIGS] The inclusion of a wilderness in *Bard's Tale II* gave a good amount of extra places to explore – feeling like a more fully-formed RPG experience.

» [PC] EA released *The Bard's Tale Construction Set*, a system that allowed players to use the tools to create their own adventures.

A dark, cloaked figure laughs. "So you think you could defeat me again, like the way you tricked me at Baron Harkyn's castle so many years ago?"
Press any key...
Tarjan
Character AC Hits Cond SpPt
Vampire Lord -29 9999 9999 0
BILBO -24 364 364 0
SIR JASON -50 316 316 0
KNIGHT -25 753 753 15
MERLIN -17 505 505 637
ILURE -15 825 825 639
EL CID -20 Dead 0 0

» [Apple II] Tarjan was the ultimate enemy of the original game, and returned in the third as Rebecca Heineman hoped to pretend the second never happened.

were not fond of the difficulty. Once again, Rebecca worked on its conversions to the Apple IIGS, C64, DOS and Amiga, with the various ports releasing over the course on 1986, 1987 and 1988.

"*Bard's Tale II* was done but that had really very little involvement with Interplay," says Rebecca, "other than Todd Camaster doing art and Interplay doing QA. And that was really all their involvement, which was also the reason that I think the game was very hard because it was never balanced. Well, after *Bard's Tale II* was done, [Interplay] just said, 'Forget it, we don't want to do this anymore.' Brian negotiated some sort of contract which essentially ended the relationship [with Michael Cranford] and Brian really wanted to work on a new game, which he was doing with another friend Alan Pavlish that would eventually become *Wasteland*." The series may well have ended there if not for Rebecca's insistence; after having spent a considerable amount of time working on the code of *The Bard's Tale* – from coding elements such as the graphics engines to the numerous ports it received – she felt devoted to the franchise, and wanted to give a third title a shot.

"I took over the project," says Rebecca, adding, "we were a skeleton crew. *Wasteland* had a team of about 15 people, we did *Bard's Tale III* with four. The four people were myself, Todd Camasta, Mike Stackpole – who was only really on the project for a couple of months, because he just wrote the base story – and then we had Kurt Heiden who did the music for me."

Despite the varied work she had took part in at Interplay, Rebecca had mostly worked on ports of other existing games. Here, she was able to take *The Bard's Tale* game and really improve on it, and make it a game that was worthy of the fanbase it had built up. "The first thing I did was delete all of Michael Cranford's code," she says. "I went in with a clean sheet of paper – which is essentially what I did for the *Bard's Tale IIGS* version – and rewrote the engine, because I had to do it on 16-bit processors and stuff." Rebecca used much of the techniques she had learnt in creating engines for the Apple IIGS versions of the previous *Bard's Tale* games and adapted it even further. "I actually created a little language that was designed to write RPGs, and the language would be something like 'If at this square, then do this event, otherwise do that event' – it had a branch tree, sort of, and it was all done in this interpreted language so all I stored was a minimal amount of data and all the text. And I put in compressed text – which was something I did in *Bard's Tale*, *Bard's Tale II* and *Bard's Tale III* for the IIGS because I needed to save space." This meant a great deal of data space was saved for the third outing of the series, allowing for much more content to be added in without requiring too many floppy discs. "I had several different worlds, I had several outdoor maps – which were arbitrary sizes, which allowed me to have 3D mazes. And because the maps could be any size I was really only limited by how much memory I had, I could have anything I wanted."

> "I took over the project we were a skeleton crew. Wasteland had a team of about 15 people, we did Bard's Tale III with four"
> Rebecca Heineman

The improvements to *The Bard's Tale III* – which was released in 1988 on Apple II and C64 with the subtitle of *Thief Of Fate* – made it the most jam-packed RPG from Interplay to date. The game managed to maintain the series' popularity and even beat the company's own *Wasteland* – which had a considerably larger budget behind it – in terms of sales and long-term popularity.

It might not surprise you, then, to learn that a fourth game was in the works, but sadly it never came to fruition; this was, suggests Rebecca, all down to 'business'. Work had already begun on the fourth entry, with Rebecca once again at the helm and managing to reduce the code size down so considerably that numerous new features could be included.

"After [the release of *Thief Of Fate*] I started working on *Bard's Tale IV*, and we were going to do it set in another area where magic is outlawed and so forth, I wanted to do some new storylines in there. But during this time, Interplay was changing from a developer who was doing games for publishers, to being a publisher itself," states Rebecca. "The money we earned from *Bard's Tale III* and *Wasteland* was enough that we were actually able to finance our own games. We needed

You Are Here

Ten of the most interesting locations in Skara Brae

HARKYN'S CASTLE

■ It's the most prominent location of the city, but as with much of Skara Brae, there's not much hope for any who enter. You'll need to fight through multiple Guardian Statues to survive this dungeon.

ROSCOE'S ENERGY EMPORIUM

■ As powerful as mages can be, the demand spellcasting puts on their energy levels can be a struggle to contend with. Visit Roscoe's to restore your spellpoints – for a rather large fee, of course.

ADVENTURER'S GUILD

■ This is where all good adventures begin, but you'll need to visit here any time you want to swap out your party for different characters - or even find brand-new adventurers to add to your group.

KYLEARAN'S AMBER TOWER

■ The powerful Archmage Kylearan might be secretive – holed up in this tower behind locked iron gates – but if you survive his labyrinth of traps and beasts, he'll be sure to reward you.

CITY GATES

■ With a snowstorm raging outside it looks like you won't be leaving Skara Brae any time soon. In *Bard's Tale III*, it's these same gates you'll enter through.

REVIEW BOARD

■ As perhaps the single most important location for all budding adventurers, you'll need to visit the Review Board once you've acquired enough experience points to level up.

GARTH'S EQUIPMENT SHOPPE

■ You'll, obviously, need to stock up on weapons and armour if you want to survive the constantly mean streets of Skara Brae. Of course, only the best weapons will need to be recovered from treasure hoards.

THE MAD GOD TEMPLE

■ The crazed mage Tarjan – known by his followers as the Mad God – has built a dungeon within the catacombs under the Mad God Temple, but it's only available to those who know the password.

THE TEMPLE DISTRICT

■ There are as many temples as inns in Skara Brae, but the central courtyard of the town is perhaps the most prominent home for the religious. Visit here if any in your party need healing.

SCARLET BARD INN

■ There are numerous inns throughout Skara Brae where you and your party can gather for drinks. The Scarlet Bard, however, has its own problems to contend with in the cellar – and it's Skara Brae's initial dungeon.

to find a distributor, because while we were a publisher we really didn't want to make the packages. Well EA, because we were making them so much money, said 'sure, we'll be your distributor' – [so the games were] distributed by EA and published by Interplay."

However Activision, also known as the distributor, Mediagenic at the time, contacted Interplay, recalling the profits it had made on Interplay's early text adventures in the hopes of working with company once more. It offered a similar deal, but one that would take less of a percentage than what Electronic Arts was offering.

Seeing the obvious business sense in the offer Brian Fargo signed the deal, and the two games that Interplay would first publish in-house – *Neuromancer* and *Battle Chess* – would be distributed through Mediagenic. "Well, that didn't sit well with EA," claims Rebecca. "They were pissed. The trouble was that when we signed a deal for *The Bard's Tale* and *Wasteland*, we did it as a work-for-hire publishing deal in which the intellectual property for these games becomes property of EA. So EA said, 'Well, fine then, we're just not going to have a *Bard's Tale IV*, we are not going to do a *Wasteland 2*, we're not going to let you do anything with these IPs, unless you of sign a deal to do distribution with us'. And at that point Brian rightfully told them 'no.'"

Work on further ports for *The Bard's Tale III* were immediately scrapped as a result, while all the effort that had gone into *Bard's Tale IV* had to be diverted into another project that didn't carry the series' name. Thankfully, the work on the game didn't go to waste and it would eventually release under the name of *Dragon Wars* in 1989 for Apple II, among numerous other ports.

» [PC] Though *Dragon Wars* wasn't a *Bard's Tale* game, there were a lot of similarities between the titles.

» [ZX Spectrum] *The Bard's Tale* was ported over to the most platforms, even the likes of the Speccy and C64.

Conversion Capers

The bard's tale is one that's been told many times…

AMIGA

■ The Amiga, like many ports from DOS and Apple II, suffered thanks to its pauses caused by load times. They weren't by any stretch unbearable, and this version makes a good go of the artwork the game was known for.

AMSTRAD CPC

■ The limitations of the hardware meant that the Amstrad version was hardly able to keep up with its bigger brothers, but it still offered a very slick and functional experience with all the core gameplay elements still intact.

APPLE II

■ Though original release for *The Bard's Tale* was on Apple II, it wasn't the best version for long, it still offered better art and sound than its competitors. It utilised a text-entry spellcasting mechanic that other versions would mimic.

APPLE IIGS

■ Understandably – as the most powerful Apple machine at the time – the Apple IIGS version of the game was one of, if not the best, iterations of *The Bard's Tale*. Much better art and sound made the game really stand out, while animations added extra life to the world.

APPLE MACINTOSH

■ This colourless version offers a certain charm, but when compared to the more capable machines, it obviously doesn't match up. Input was changed quite heavily to be playable with the mouse and cursor. One of the most unique ports of the game.

ATARI ST

■ The Atari ST version would end up comparable to the IIGS version, with the same high-quality art and sound. It even made use of the animated movement effect when wandering around Skara Brae or different dungeons, something that most versions couldn't handle.

COMMODORE 64

■ It was impossible to overlook the C64 as a machine, but it just wasn't technically capable of matching the more powerful hardware available at the time. All the same, though, it replicated the gameplay of the Apple II version just as well with no costs to design or play.

DOS

■ Perhaps one of the more popular versions of the game, the DOS version actually didn't have quite as many bells and whistles as the Apple IIGS and Atari ST equivalents. Its art was slightly worse (albeit only really in the town itself), but it was still one of the better versions.

NEC-9801

■ The art for the Japanese version of the game was adapted in a number of ways, but the core gameplay remained the same. Extra effort went into making quality art where possible, but the machine just wasn't as powerful – and so alterations needed to be made.

NES

■ Though the mechanics all remained the same, the NES title was changed more than any other port. The map was different, the menus and options were altered and the visuals were reduced heavily to allow for it to work on the console. It was much easier and linear, too.

ZX SPECTRUM

■ This one is easily the weakest port of them all, but that's not a surprise considering the effort involved in getting the game to run on the hardware. Very poor art was its biggest downfall, but for the most part, the design of the game was the same.

» [PC] The *Bard's Tale IV* received praise and award nominations for its music and sound design.

> "I've been watching technology achieve new heights and thought a classic dungeon crawl could look incredible"
> Brian Fargo

Despite such opposition, this would not become how the franchise would end. EA itself had attempted – unknown to Interplay – to create a *Bard's Tale IV*, a project that continued to be delayed until eventually an executive decided to cancel the game. Rebecca, too, had continued her love of the franchise, and even attempted to work with EA on another new entry for the franchise years later. "We sent a demo to EA in 1999," she tells us, though the pitch would only fall on deaf ears. "At that point EA had a real bad taste in their mouth about the franchise because even though it made them a boatload of money when Interplay was working on it, EA's attempts to do their own variant on it just met with a very expensive failure. But when I was trying to pitch it, I didn't know the producer I was pitching it to was also the guy who killed EA's *Bard's Tale IV*." EA did release a *Bard's Tale Construction Set* in 1991 for DOS and Amiga with it being developed by Tim Cain and built off the code of *Bard's Tale III*, but the company simply had no interest in working on the franchise anymore. And so it would be that the beleaguered series had reached a rather untimely end. That is, until now.

With the rise of Kickstarter giving a rebirth to nostalgic gaming experiences and revitalising numerous long-dead retro titles and genres, Brian Fargo and InXile Entertainment has returned off the back of *Wasteland 2* to see a new, modern entry into *The Bard's Tale* series. "I've been watching technology achieve new heights in realism and graphic awesomeness and always thought a classic dungeon crawl could look incredible," says Brian. "We have so many advantages with this kind of game to max out what the new engines and physics algorithms can do. Our kind of game is single-player and combat isn't in real time; this frees up processing power for us to make games that would normally look like a graphic demo. In fact when we released our first in engine demo we had a lot of comments that it wasn't real or was pre-rendered, all of which wasn't true." Having reached its goal of $1.2 million dollars on Kickstarter, *The Bard's Tard IV* finally arrived, over 15 years since the previous true *Bard's Tale* game. Even Rebecca worked on her own Kickstarter, alongside veteran developers, to relive her passion for that classic *Bard's Tale* role-playing gameplay. *Dragons Of The Rip* is to be an imagining of what a new *Dragon Wars* would look like, and promises the gameplay of *The Bard's Tale* with brand new twists – in terms of both gameplay and story. While it might have once looked like *The Bard's Tale* franchise would be forever lost to the annals of history, it seems it's back – and could perhaps be bigger than ever thanks to help from the people that helped make it an established name: the fans.

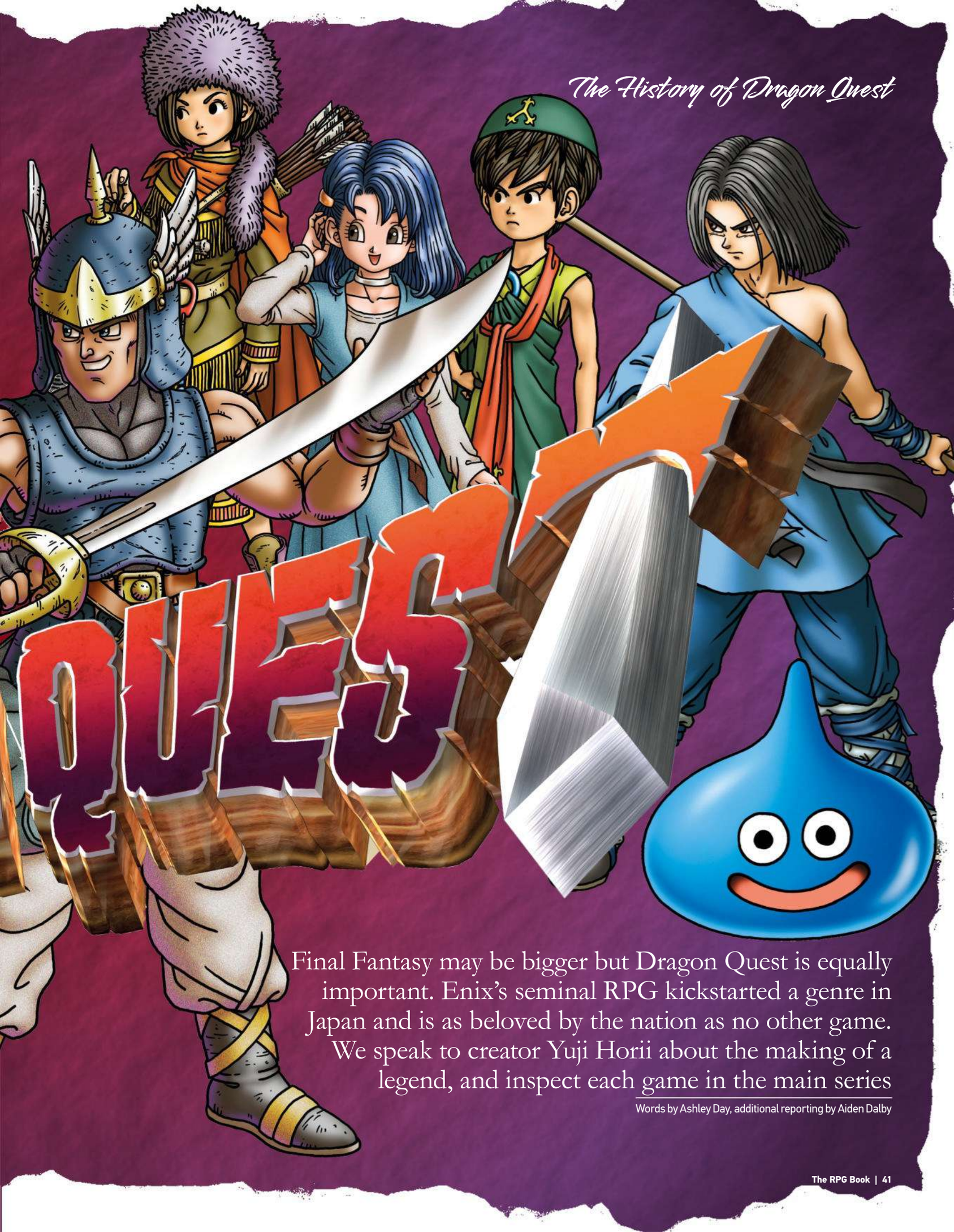
» We wouldn't want to mess with this dangerous-looking wizard-litch-thing in *Bard's Tale IV*.

Out Of Tune

The 2004 game marked a different direction for the series

With the rift between Interplay and EA casting doubts over franchise's existence, it was a surprise that this InXile Entertainment-developed PS2 title was ever given a release. But in truth it was a dramatically different experience, much to the distaste of many fans – who had longed for a true RPG successor. Released in 2004, this hack-and-slash RPG ran on the Snowblind Engine – the same tools that had powered *Baldur's Gate: Dark Alliance* and *Champions Of Norrath*, and that had caused Interplay to become embroiled in a lawsuit with developer Snowblind Studios. The game, however, offered a more tongue-in-cheek approach to RPG gaming, and poked fun at a lot of common, and tired, RPG devices, such as wolves that inexplicably carry gold coins for loot or initial quests that task you with killing rats. The humorous tone was met with equal parts disdain and praise, depending on the familiarity with the name '*Bard's Tale*', but forwent so many existing elements from the previous games that the only thing they shared was the title. It was an attempt by InXile Entertainment to create a modern RPG, and it managed to build up a small cult-following all the same. To those involved with the originals, however, it wasn't considered to be a *Bard's Tale* game, and its poor reception at retail meant that this new direction never took off for the franchise. If you're a fan of the series, you'll likely count that as a blessing.

THE HISTORY OF
DRAGON



Final Fantasy may be bigger but Dragon Quest is equally important. Enix's seminal RPG kickstarted a genre in Japan and is as beloved by the nation as no other game. We speak to creator Yuji Horii about the making of a legend, and inspect each game in the main series

Words by Ashley Day, additional reporting by Aiden Dalby

Dragon Quest

Format: NES
Released: 1986 (Japan), 1989 (US)
Developed by: Chunsoft

Both the epitome of the great Japanese RPG and perhaps also the greatest JRPG, *Dragon Quest* laid many of the foundations for the genre; blueprints that would be followed for decades to come. But like all role-playing games, *Dragon Quest*'s origins can be traced back to the west, to computer role-playing games and to *D&D*.

"I had been a great fan of Apple PC games, RPGs in particular, even before I was involved with the development of *Dragon Quest*," reveals Yuji Horii. "I found it fascinating to be able to improve your capabilities while you are having a good time playing the game. However, although the RPG was such fun to play, RPG titles for PC back then were very challenging for ordinary gamers, as they often required complex game controls. This motivated me to create *Dragon Quest*, because I wanted those ordinary gamers to discover how much fun RPGs could be. In order to make *Dragon Quest* more accessible, I made the game controls as intuitive as possible and created a story that would help the player immerse himself into the in-game world."

Dragon Quest certainly was simple. It featured a typical 'rescue the princess' plot and an interface with commands so straightforward that they even included one to climb stairs. Yet this simplicity, plus *Dragon Quest*'s home on the most popular Japanese console of its time, the Famicom, endeared it to an audience that had no previous idea of what an RPG even was. The thrill of the epic, open world, the pulse-quickening threat of random battles, and the weeks-long pacing totally in contrast to the arcade-style games of the day opened gamers' eyes to a whole new interactive experience and secured *Dragon Quest*'s place in the story of videogames.

But this achievement wasn't Horii's alone. *Dragon Quest* was created and overseen by a team of three individuals who remained together throughout the series. The two other men were Akira Toriyama, one of Japan's most loved comic artists and the creator of *Dragon Ball*, and the late Koichi Sugiyama, a long-established videogame composer. Horii explains how the team came together. "I was introduced to Mr Toriyama by [Kazuhiko Torishima], whom I had worked for before. He was an editor of *Weekly Boys' Jump* when I was writing photo-articles for the magazine. Mr Toriyama was already a household name, then famous for comics like *Dr Slump*, and Mr Torishima was the editor in charge of them. So it was sheer luck that I was linked to Mr Toriyama.

"As for Mr Sugiyama, he had been composing for games by Enix even before he began to write *Dragon Quest* music. He was a game enthusiast and, apparently, he initially started working for Enix after sending in a questionnaire postcard, which had been attached to an Enix game he had bought. We asked Mr Sugiyama to provide music for the project, and it was a decision made by [Yukinobu Chida], the producer of *Dragon Quest*.

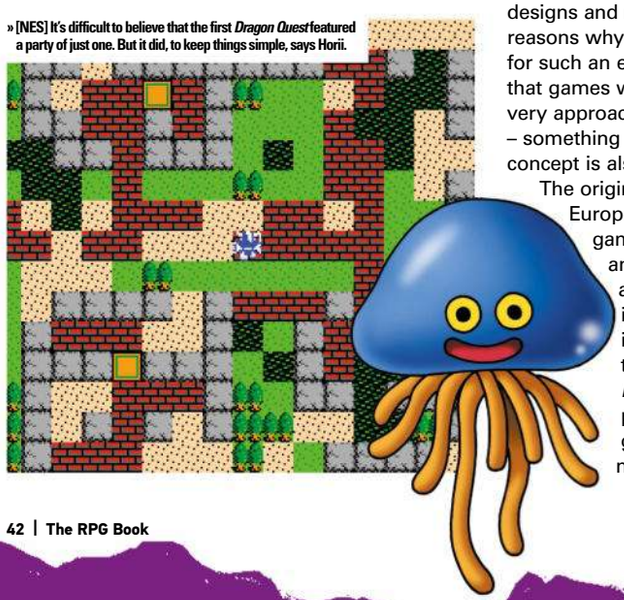
"Mr Toriyama and Mr Sugiyama made amazing contributions to *Dragon Quest*; great character designs and music respectively. One of the reasons why we worked together successfully for such an extended length of time may be that games we make together are invariably very approachable with a few small 'hooks' – something you will never feel tired of. This concept is also in *Dragon Quest* itself, of course."

The original *Dragon Quest* never came to Europe, leaving many to discover the game years later through emulation and a 2019 Switch release. But it did arrive in America, three years after its Japanese debut. Despite featuring improved visuals, in line with the then-released *Dragon Quest II* and *Dragon Quest III*, the game sold poorly until Nintendo stepped in to give '*Dragon Warrior*' away to every new subscriber to its official *Nintendo*

> "Dragon Quest opened gamers' eyes to a whole new interactive experience and secured its place in the story of videogames"

» [NES] There's a certain charm to the first four games' visuals, granted, but we have to say they were basic even by the standards of the NES.

» [NES] It's difficult to believe that the first *Dragon Quest* featured a party of just one. But it did, to keep things simple, says Horii.



Power magazine. This Trojan horse of a giveaway put *Dragon Quest* into the hands of every loyal NES owner in the country and established the genre just in time for Square's *Final Fantasy* to arrive the next year. It also marked the beginning of a relationship with Nintendo that, while not a constant, has helped *DQ* reach new audiences many times since.

Dragon Quest II: The Pantheon Of Evil

Format: NES
Released: 1987 (Japan), 1990 (US)
Developed by: Chunsoft

As important and influential as the original *Dragon Quest* was, it certainly didn't do everything. "Although there were so many things we wanted to achieve with *Dragon Quest*, as far as the first title is concerned, we had to trim them off one after another because we only had a limited amount of memory to work with," Horii explains. "We had to contrive ways to squeeze in the scenario, graphics and music within the memory limit, which was 64KB in those days."

One of the most unbelievable omissions from the first *Dragon Quest* was multi-member parties – a staple of the RPG going all the way back even to those games that inspired Horii. But he was determined to include them in the sequel, except, of course, with the mantra of accessibility at the forefront of everything he did. "We managed to include party gameplay for *Dragon Quest II*, which I would mention as the most important thing we achieved with the game. I expected that our fans would find it too much of a performance to play all three members of the party from the start. That is why the story was revealed in such a way to introduce the player gradually to the multi-member party system, where the number of party members increases by one at a time."

Dragon Quest II's innovations didn't end there. One of the most interesting aspects of the adventure is that the princess, once rescued, joins your party. She may be underpowered, but this active role was a huge step beyond the more traditional characters of the first game, while the fixed personalities and professionally written characters of the party were a world away from the unscripted, user-defined characters of western role-playing adventures.

Dragon Quest III: Into The Legend

Format: NES
Released: 1988 (Japan), 1991 (US)
Developed by: Chunsoft

If *Dragon Quest* and *Dragon Quest II* were the defining entries in Yuji Horii's foundling series, then *Dragon Quest III* was the main event. It was a culmination of everything the team had been working toward.

ROGUES' GALLERY

HERO
Dragon Quest's original 'Dragon Warrior', the Hero set the template for all *DQ* protagonists to come. Distinguished by his horned helmet, the silent protagonist was conceived as a conduit between player and game world, his lack of personality helping players to put themselves into the game.

LOTO
The mythical hero of ancient times, referred to in legends throughout the events of the first two *Dragon Quest* games. At the end of *Dragon Quest III*, it's revealed that you've been playing as Loto all along. An extremely popular character, Loto – also called Erdrick in the US games – is referenced throughout the series.

HERO (*DQV*)
One of the best *DQ* characters in terms of the emotional bond he forms with the player, *Dragon Quest V*'s Hero goes through the pleasure of picking a wife from two lovely women and the sheer anguish of being turned to stone, unable to aid in the quest of his adult children.

TORNEKO
One of the playable characters in *Dragon Quest IV*, Torneko is a humble shopkeeper who sets out on a quest once he hears of the existence of a magical item that undoes that *DQ* tradition of losing half your cash upon death. Torneko later appeared as the main character in the first three *Mystery Dungeon* games.

NERA
A gentle mage from a wealthy background, Nera is the second potential bride in *Dragon Quest V* and meets the hero when he rescues her dog. If the player opts not to choose her then Nera later marries her childhood friend, Crispin.

BIANCA
One of the two women the player can marry in *Dragon Quest V*, Bianca is a herbalist and the homelier of the two spouses. Though the player is free to choose either bride, Bianca is the one the game encourages you to bond with.

GABO
One of the most interesting characters in *DQVII*, Gabo is a wolf turned into a boy. Retaining many of his animal qualities, he struggles to relate to the other characters, is always hungry, and benefits from some great skills, including heightened agility and a paralysing bite.

KING TRODE
The character referred to in the title of *Dragon Quest VIII: Journey Of The Cursed King*. King Trode has been turned into a goblin-like creature and is trying to reclaim his humanity along with his daughter, who has been turned into a horse.

MELVIN
DQVII's Melvin once fought alongside God in a battle with the devil. He's a noble warrior, fascinated with the peaceful world. But his old-fashioned attitude to women sometimes gets the better of him.

YANGUS
A brash bandit trying to go straight, Yangus lends his strength to the party of *Dragon Quest VIII*. Voiced in a comical, almost cockney fashion, Yangus repeatedly refers to the hero as 'guv' and is one of the most-liked characters in the series.

» [SNES] The first three games were all remade for the Super Famicom and look loads better. They were recently reissued on a Wii compilation.

"More or less, everything we originally wanted to achieve with *Dragon Quest* was achieved with *Dragon Quest III*," remembers Horii. "You can form your party as you wish, change your job and so forth. In that sense, the story of *Dragon Quest III* was smoothly linked to that of the first title, and I should imagine that is why *Dragon Quest III* left such a strong impression in the heart of many fans."

'Strong impression'. That's quite the understatement if ever there was one. During many years of **Retro Gamer** meeting and interviewing Japanese game creators, the one title that's mentioned time and time again as a personal favourite is *Dragon Quest III*. The sheer affection for this title may come from the technological advancements, such as the day/night cycle, the jump to a four-character party system, or the new job system, as Horii suggests – but we're willing to bet that it has just as much to do with the innovative story. While *Dragon Quest II* was a direct sequel to its forebear, the events of *Dragon Quest III* seemed unrelated to the previous two, right up until the end when the hero was revealed to be the 'Hero Of Legend', heard of only in the mythological stories told by the humble townsfolk of the first two games.

Gameplay enhancements, a memorable story, and the addition of battery backup – a first for the Japanese releases in the series – made *DQIII* a firm favourite in its homeland and saw people take to the streets in their millions to buy the game, causing so much retail chaos that Enix was forced to release all future editions of *Dragon Quest* on a weekend. Horii remembers the moment he saw the madness for himself: "On the day *Dragon Quest III* was released, I took a train journey to witness the big queue while hiding myself from the fans. The frenzy was astonishing and yet I remember watching the queue as though it had nothing to do with me."

Dragon Quest had become a phenomenon.

Dragon Quest IV: Chapters Of The Chosen

Format: NES
Released: 1990 (Japan), 1992 (US), 2008 (Europe)
Developed by: Chunsoft

By 1990, the NES, and by extension the Famicom, was beginning to look a little long in the tooth. Major Japanese series like *Super Mario*, *Castlevania* and even *Final Fantasy* had moved on to Nintendo's successor, the Super Famicom/SNES. But not *Dragon Quest*.

"I had already had some ideas for *Dragon Quest IV* before completing the development of *DQIII*," says Horii. "It was still the heyday of the NES and so I did not really think I had other platforms to consider for the new project."

Yet with technological advancements a no-go, and *Dragon Quest*'s systems finely tuned by *DQIII*, Horii had little choice but to innovate in the storytelling department. As the subtitle suggests, *Chapters Of The Chosen* was broken down into vignettes, which put the player in control of a different party in each before uniting them all with the true hero for the finale. It was just the breath of fresh air the series needed, or any series would have needed, by its third sequel.

"When *DQIII* came out, I felt as though I had already done everything I ever wanted to do and had to think hard to work out what I should do next," Horii recalls. "I opted for the structure of different chapters because I wanted to tell individual stories of other party members as well as the main character. You travel with other members in the party in *DQIII*, and my thoughts started with the notion that every one of them would have a personal life."

SPIN-OFFS

Dragon Quest has quite a few spin-off games, and some of them are actually quite good

DRAGON QUEST MONSTERS

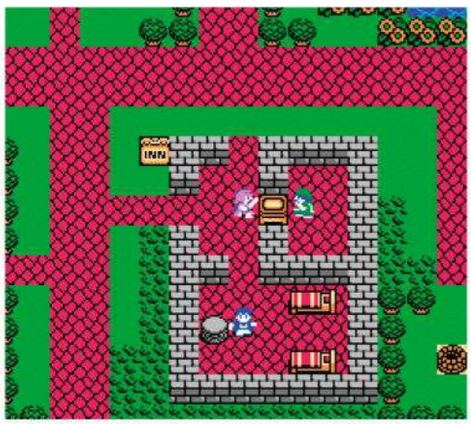
Often thought of as a *Pokémon* clone, *Dragon Quest Monsters* grew out of the series' ability to recruit enemy monsters and has, since 1998, grown into a popular series in its own right. *DQM* is a handheld-only series.

MYSTERY DUNGEON

This long-running series of roguelike RPGs from Chunsoft has adopted many famous videogame brands over the years, including *Chocobo* and *Pokémon*, but its first three entries were based on *Dragon Quest* and starred *DQIV*'s Torneko.

ROCKET SLIME

***Dragon Quest*'s most basic enemy, and a favourite *DQ* mascot with fans, got his own GBA game in 2003 and two sequels on the DS and 3DS. The game largely involves using the slime as a weapon by stretching and firing him across the stage.**



Such a revolutionary story system didn't come without its hardships, however. "In the last chapter, an AI system was in place so that other party members can take part in battles. I thought it would be more interesting if the player cannot control these characters because they would have their own personality, different from the protagonist's. I must confess that the AI system needed a lot of adjustments but, thanks to it, some of the characters were more distinctively identified, such as Kiryl, who casts Thwack all the time."

The technical difficulties were definitely worth it. *Dragon Quest IV*'s unique structure allows it to stand out from the crowd, and in the years since its release, following a particularly good remake on the DS that finally brought the game to Europe, *Chapters Of The Chosen* has taken its place as one of the most interesting and popular instalments in the series.

> "When Dragon Quest III was released, I witnessed the big queue while hiding from the fans. The frenzy was astonishing"

» [SNES] As hardware increased in complexity, it allowed Horii and his team to tell more emotionally engaging tales in *Dragon Quest V* and *VI*.

Dragon Quest V: Hand Of The Heavenly Bride

Format: Super Famicom
Released: 1992 (Japan), 2009 (US, Europe)
Developed by: Chunsoft

By the mid-Nineties, a struggling Enix had closed its US office, and the fifth *Dragon Quest* went unreleased in the west for over a decade, until its DS remake. It was a shame, because the first 16-bit instalment was a revelation, excelling in both gameplay and storytelling. Horii prefers to credit such advancements to good design rather than the technological advantage offered by a new console, however: "The ample memory capacity and improved graphical performance made a lot of things easier. For example, we could create more elaborate town maps, while you no longer have to reduce the size of the scenario and so forth. However, I do not necessarily take much notice of platform specs. Whatever ideas you may have, at the end of the day, you will have to develop your game to be able to comply with the given specs. That is how I make games."

Among those advancements was a greatly enhanced monster-recruitment system. Though monster recruitment was introduced in *Dragon Quest IV*, the system truly came into its own in *Dragon Quest V*, with a vast roster of monsters that provoked a 'gotta catch 'em all' mentality in the player. But, much like *Dragon Quest IV*, it's the innovative story that makes *Dragon Quest V* so interesting. "With *DQV*, I wanted to tell a story where three generations of characters defeat Satan," says Horii. And that's exactly what he did. Nearly 20 years before BioWare's *Dragon Age II* attempted to tell a story that spanned decades, *Dragon Quest* got there first with a powerful tale that allowed an unprecedented level of emotional involvement on the part of the player.

Being able to choose your wife from two – later three, in the remake – women made the player much more invested in the life of the main protagonist and had an effect on the characteristics of his children, who you later play as. The story's most affecting note, however, is the fate of that initial main character, who finds himself cursed to live out the rest of his days as a motionless statue, ever watching the struggles of his children but powerless to help them. The tale is a classical tragedy that could have easily descended into trite sentimentality but treads a

ITADAKI STREET/ BOOM STREET

Itadaki Street **is a virtual board game that was created by Yuji Horii in the Famicom days. The most interesting is the PS2 edition, which featured characters from both *Dragon Quest* and *Final Fantasy*. The series is about to head to Europe with the Wii game, *Boom Street*, which features characters from both the *Mario* and *Dragon Quest* series.**

DRAGON QUEST SWORDS

First released as a TV game with a plastic sword controller, *Dragon Quest Kenshin* later inspired this Wii game, which saw the player explore Horii's world in first-person, slashing the Remote at any monsters they crossed paths with. Sadly, it's not very good.

DRAGON QUEST HEROES

Partnering up with *Dynasty Warriors* developer Omega Force, *Dragon Quest* entered full-on action hack-and-slash territory with this celebratory sub-series. Featuring party members from the series past, this is some good old action-packed fun.

DRAGON QUEST BUILDERS

Capitalising on the runaway popularity of *Minecraft*, this unique spin-off captures the lighthearted adventure tone of *Dragon Quest* and marries it to game design focused on constructing buildings and settlements. It sounds strange, but it works extremely well.

relatively delicate path throughout *Hand Of The Heavenly Bride*.

This new-found maturity may have been a sign that Japan's videogame audience was growing up – and *Dragon Quest* is indeed known for its ability to appeal to generations that wouldn't normally play games – but Horii denies any suggestion that *Hand Of The Heavenly Bride* was created with older players in mind: "I did not pay much attention to the age of the demographic. I always make games with a belief that what I find interesting will be found interesting by other people."

Dragon Quest VI: Realms Of Revelation

Format: Super Famicom
Released: 1995 (Japan), 2011 (US, Europe)
Developed by: Heartbeat

After the spiralling innovation of its three direct predecessors, *Dragon Quest VI* is the closest the series has come to a 'safe sequel'. It cherry picks some of the most popular elements from previous games, such as *Dragon Quest III*'s job system and dual worlds, then spruces it up with the series' most impressive graphics and largest world to date.

It didn't really feel underwhelming – this was a great RPG by any other standards – but it didn't quite feel as inventive as it could have done. We put it to Horii that he may have been overworked on *DQVI*, which was developed around the same time as *Chrono Trigger* – Horii and Toriyama's collaboration with *Final Fantasy* creator Hironobu Sakaguchi, and a work superior to any of their individual works.

"I contributed to *Chrono Trigger* by providing ideas for the story, as well as writing the first part of the scenario," he says. "I also supervised the development sometimes, but the project was basically in the hands of the Square staff. So I did not find as much difficulty as I would have expected in making sure that my schedule was manageable. With that said, it was extremely stressful that I had to keep two projects going simultaneously."

Perhaps that's why Horii took five years to complete the next *Dragon Quest*.

Dragon Quest VII: Warriors Of Eden

Format: PlayStation
Released: 2000 (Japan), 2001 (US)
Developed by: Heartbeat

In the first five years of *Dragon Quest* development, Yuji Horii and friends were able to create four individual and brilliant entries in the series, but between 1995 and 2000 the team made only one. Was this just a natural by-product of developing for ever more complicated hardware as *Dragon Quest VII* made

DEVELOPER PROFILES

More developers than you might think have been involved in the making of Dragon Quest. Here's the lot of them...

ARMOR PROJECT
Technically the main developer of every *Dragon Quest*, Armor Project is a holding name for the partnership of Yuji Horii, Koichi Sugiyama and Akira Toriyama.

ENIX
The publisher of the first seven *Dragon Quest* games, Enix was a major player in the 8-bit, 16-bit and 32-bit eras, until it merged with Square in 2003 to become Square Enix.

SPIKE CHUNSOFT
Founded by Koichi Nakamura of Enix, Chunsoft started in 1984 and developed the first five *Dragon Quest* titles, as well as the *Mystery Dungeon* series. It is still operating after a merger with Spike in 2012.

HEARTBEAT
A relatively obscure developer responsible for *Dragon Quest VI* and *Dragon Quest VII*, as well as a couple of remakes. Heartbeat ceased game development in 2002, but some of its staff went on to form Genius Sonority, which has worked on some *DQ* spin-offs.

ARTEPIAZZA
Originally recruited to create the story scenes for the Super Famicom remake of *Dragon Quest III*, ArtePiazza eventually became the go-to developer for *Dragon Quest* remakes as a whole and has handled almost all of them since 2001.

LEVEL-5
A huge Japanese powerhouse, thanks largely to the success of its own *Professor Layton* series, Level-5 so impressed Square Enix with its *Dark Cloud* and *Dark Chronicle* PS2 games that it was then trusted to develop both *Dragon Quest VIII* and *Dragon Quest IX*.

SQUARE ENIX
The publisher and producer of every *Dragon Quest since VIII*, following the 2003 merger with Enix. Square Enix took over development duties for *Dragon Quest X*, and continued with them for *Dragon Quest XI*.

NINTENDO
Though it has never made a *Dragon Quest* game, Nintendo's support for the series has been very important to its success, particularly in the west. Nintendo Of America helped the first game get off the ground by giving it away to *Nintendo Power* subscribers, while Nintendo UK helped the launch of *Dragon Quest IX* by publishing the DS game and recruiting Irish pop duo Jedward, of all people, to advertise it.

the jump from the Super Famicom to the PlayStation, or was there more to it than that?

"For the first time in the franchise, *Dragon Quest VII* used CD-ROM as the medium," Horii explains. "So I automatically assumed that I would never be hindered by memory capacity shortage again and that I would be able to do anything I wanted! However, I was bound by storage limitations after all, this time due to the restricted amount of available memory on the console itself. Meanwhile, the scenario ended up being as big as 10,000 pages and gave us a lot of hard work before we finally managed to squeeze it into a single game."

Horii's ambitious design caused *Dragon Quest VII* to be delayed numerous times and, when it eventually arrived, the PlayStation was in its final years and had been graced by three equally brilliant *Final Fantasy* games, allowing Squaresoft's primary RPG franchise to capture the world's attention while *Dragon Quest* slept.

Those hardcore fans who stayed faithful, even as the PlayStation 2 was released, were more than rewarded for their loyalty, however. The epic design of *Dragon Quest VII* produced a game that took well over 100 hours to complete, so it was well worth the wait. Meanwhile, the design of the world, which saw continents periodically rise from beneath the sea, gradually expanding the scope of the world and broadening the player's horizons, returned a little bit of the magic, imagination and invention that felt missing from *DQVI*.

And rightly so. If Horii was unaware of maturing audience expectations around the release of *Dragon Quest V*, he certainly felt it in the post-*Final Fantasy VII* age. "We always feel considerable pressure each time we make a new *Dragon Quest*; not only *DQVII*," he says. "Our fans expect a new game to be twice as interesting as the previous one. If it fails to meet the expectation, they will moan, '*DQ* is not interesting any more!' *DQVII* featured a big story, which comprised many sub-stories of different tastes. I was happy to see that each of those components and characters attracted different groups of fans."

days – to always put *Dragon Quest* where it will attract the highest possible user base at that moment in time. *Dragon Quest VIII* represented a number of firsts. Most notably, it was the first to be made following the historic merger of Enix and Square, a move that Horii was largely unaffected by due to being an independent contractor rather than an Enix employee. "I was really surprised when the merger was announced," he remembers. "Although *Dragon Quest VIII* had already been in development, the new company, Square Enix, continued to give full support to our traditional way of making *Dragon Quest* titles. So, as I looked from a *Dragon Quest* creator's standpoint, I did not notice any particular changes in the direction we took after the merger."

Dragon Quest VIII's other firsts include being the first developed by Level-5, of *Professor Layton* fame; the first to be released in Europe; and, in the west at least, the first to feature full recorded voice acting. If *Dragon Quest VII* flew under the radar then *Dragon Quest VIII*, by comparison, shouted loud and proud from the rooftops. It was impossible to overlook, thanks mainly to some of the most attractive visuals on the PS2 – cartoon-quality graphics that felt perfectly suited to the series' roots while also emphasising the size, scale and sheer beauty of *DQ*'s biggest game world yet.

It's the addition of voice acting – not present in the original Japanese release – that Horii is most keen to talk about. "We had been receiving requests from western publishers who wanted to have voiceover included in their versions," he reveals. "This finally materialised simply due to our new development process. I have always had a habit of making repeated changes on spoken lines for the characters until the last minute of development. However, the script for *Dragon*

» [PlayStation] *Dragon Quest*'s profile suffered in the PlayStation era, thanks to delays and cancellations, as well as the popularity of *Final Fantasy*.

> "If Dragon Quest VII flew under the radar, Dragon Quest VIII, by comparison, shouted loud and proud from the rooftops"

» [PS2] *Dragon Quest VIII* was the first to be released in Europe, and loads more have followed since, including the DS remakes of *IV*, *V* and *VI*.

Dragon Quest VIII: Journey Of The Cursed King

Format: PlayStation 2
Released: 2004 (Japan), 2005 (US), 2006 (Europe)
Developed by: Level-5

As the PlayStation 2 took hold of the global videogames market, Horii and company wasted no time in bringing *Dragon Quest* to Sony's chart-topping console. The goal behind this decision was the same since the NES

Quest VIII was already locked for the overseas versions, and this made it possible for us to implement voices.

"As far as *Dragon Quest* is concerned, I do not think voiceover is really a must. However, I understand that western consumers welcome voices in their games. It would appear to me that the voice, rather than written words, plays a greater role in conveying subtle nuances in European languages, whereas, in Japanese, most of such nuances can be communicated by displaying words on the screen."

Horii is broadly correct in this assumption. The use of voice acting is especially important to *Dragon Quest VIII*, the plot for which revolves around the quest to help an unfortunate monarch who has been cursed to the point where he is transformed into an ugly goblin-like creature and his daughter shapeshifted into a horse. The plot plays out like a Saturday morning cartoon comedy, and the brilliantly judged voice performances only add to that feeling.

> **"It turned out to be as hard as I would have thought to tell such a voluminous story within the capacity of a handheld machine"**

» [DS] *Dragon Quest IX* represented a huge evolution for the traditional series, a trend that continued with *Dragon Quest X*

Dragon Quest IX: Sentinels Of The Starry Skies

Format: DS
Released: 2009 (Japan), 2010 (US, Europe)
Developed by: Level-5

Despite its own quiet innovations, there are a number of things the *Dragon Quest* series has always done, and both its fans and detractors would readily acknowledge that its staunch traditionalism has been key to the series' success. So when *Dragon Quest IX* was first revealed, it came with three big shocks: this was to be the first *Dragon Quest* designed for a handheld console, the first built around co-op and the first to dispense with menus in favour of a real-time battle system. By the time it was released in 2009, however, only two of these innovations remained, as the game reverted to a turn-based menu system.

"What we showed at the initial rollout for *Dragon Quest IX* was only a prototype," says Horii by way of explanation. "It was meant to demonstrate how enjoyable *DQ* multiplay could be, and we had not fixed our ideas at the stage. Throughout the development period, we were seeking the most player-friendly battle system, until we settled with the one we have now."

Dragon Quest IX suffered numerous delays, not least because of the difficulties involved in creating such a different type of RPG... and on a handheld to boot. "*DQIX* was originally not meant to be for handheld consoles," Horii tells us. "But I thought that the Nintendo DS had paved a new path to many gameplay possibilities with its use of wireless communications, and our plan originated from a desire to make use of those functions to create some interesting features for a *Dragon Quest* side project. While developing the idea further, we came to a point where we felt determined to make it really special to be worth our effort. And it was followed by our decision to develop it as a numbered *DQ* title. On the other hand, we were aware that our fans would expect a story on a big scale from a numbered *DQ* title. It turned out to be as hard as I would have thought to tell such a voluminous story within the capacity of a handheld machine."

Horii and his team pulled it off, of course. *Dragon Quest IX* is a true epic, featuring a mammoth world to explore and a series of self-contained stories in each location and the return of that old favourite, the job system, which add up to make another 100+ hour quest. Except this one was way more fun and innovative than the one found in *Dragon Quest VII*.

The multiplayer of *DQIX* is among its finest innovations, of course, but it's the other uses of the DS's connectivity that make this game special. Players could connect to the Wi-Fi service each week to download quests, shop items and even visits from favourite characters from *Dragon Quest* games past, and the game's Tag mode was used fantastically to silently trade items and rare treasure maps with any other *Dragon Quest IX* owner you happened to pass in the street.

Had the RPG, one of the most famously solitary of game genres, finally gone social? "I would say that *Dragon Quest* always had elements of social gaming," Horii answers to our surprise. "*Dragon Quest* fans would never keep their gaming experiences to themselves. Instead, they would ask other *DQ* players in their circle of friends to find out how much progress they have made and share information among them like, 'Where on earth can I find the key?' The Tag mode brought about a situation where *DQ* players go out to town with their DS and walk about in search of a player to get treasure maps from. It was almost like reality being invaded by the virtual world, which I found quite amusing."

» [DS] *Dragon Quest IX* featured completely user-created characters but still somehow retained that identifiable Toriyama illustration style.

Dragon Quest X: Rise Of The Five Tribes

Format: Wii
Release: 2012
Developed by: Square Enix

If the announcements surrounding *Dragon Quest IX* were a shock, then the reveal of *Dragon Quest X* must have been enough to send some hardcore fans to an early grave. Not only was *Rise Of The Five Tribes* set to arrive on the Wii – a console nearing the end of its lifespan, as the PlayStation was during the release of *Dragon Quest VII* – but it was also being developed for the Wii U, an then-unproven console, and was a completely online RPG, much like *Phantasy Star Online*. And just to add to the risk, this was the first *Dragon Quest* to be developed internally at Square Enix, a company that, in 2012, had a wavering track record when it came to fully online RPGs.

As *Dragon Quest X* is a massively multiplayer online role-playing game (MMORPG), dramatic changes had to be made to the game design but the developers were conscious to keep the familiar elements that players expect from the series. Due to the nature of MMORPGs, this meant that for the first in the series players could have a completely customisable character. In every prior *Dragon Quest*, the player's character was set but now gamers could adventure across the land as someone that wasn't human, and there were a range of classes to choose from. Perhaps the biggest change to the *Dragon Quest* formula was the removal of turn-based combat. Players instead could move around freely and use abilities to interrupt enemies from performing their actions. As with most massively multiplayer games, *Dragon Quest X* required a subscription fee to play however there was a two-hour window each day where players could play for free.

You start as a human when your village is attacked by Nelgel, the Lord Of Hell. Your soul is sent to a shrine far away and transferred to a new being (the player-defined avatar) and you set out on your adventure to stop Nelgel. As of the time of writing, *Dragon Quest X* is the only game in the main series that hasn't seen a release in the west. This may change in the future as during a *Dragon Quest* 35th anniversary event, it was announced that an "offline" version of the game would be coming to the Nintendo Switch.

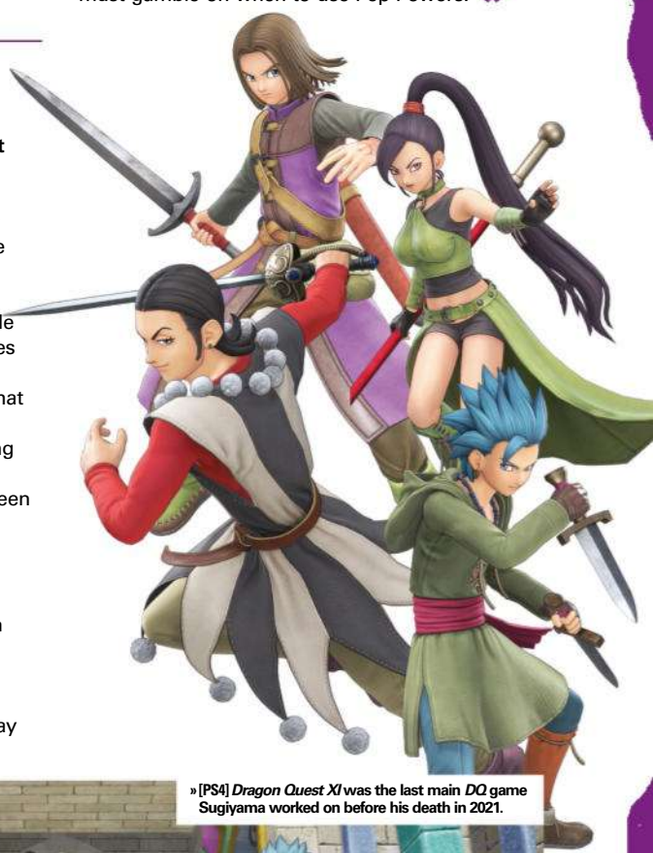
Dragon Quest XI: Echoes Of An Elusive Age

Format: 3DS, Playstation 4
Release: 2017
Developed by: Square Enix

Keeping what is seemingly now a tradition for the *Dragon Quest* series of having a surprise announcement alongside the reveal of a new game, in 2015 it was announced that the next game in the mainline series would be released in two versions. *Dragon Quest XI: Echoes Of An Elusive Age* would be released not only on the Nintendo 3DS but there would be a separate version for the Playstation 4 and the Nintendo Switch, a console which people knew very little about at the time. The stories of the two games would be identical but elements such as environments would change depending on what version you played.

The 3DS version featured some retro-looking 2D sprites on one screen, reminiscent of the Super Nintendo entries while on the other screen is the game is displayed in 3D. The console releases contained just the 3D version of the game with enhanced graphics. Westerners wanting to experience the 3DS version would need to import the game as it was never been released outside of Japan, however in 2019 *Dragon Quest XI S: Echoes Of An Elusive Age Definitive Edition* was released which allowed players to switch between 2D and 3D gameplay by visiting a church, as well as introducing other quality-of-life improvements.

In *DQXI,* players control a young man who discovers that he is the reincarnation of a hero from the past known as the Luminary. As the hero, you must find and defeat an evil looming over the land while also being hunted by the King Of Dundrasil, believing the Luminary to be the Darkspawn coming to destroy the land. *Dragon Quest XI* was released in 2017 to celebrate the 30th anniversary of the series and the game contained several references and nods for lifelong fans - some small and others not so. Combat kept the turn-based system from earlier entries but players could freely run around the combat area like in *DQX*, however in this entry your movement didn't benefit combat mechanics. The Pep system added a new twist to combat. When a character becomes Pepped Up their stats would increase and have access to unique attacks or abilities. When two or more characters were Pepped they could use combo abilities. The twist is you're not told how long Pep lasts as it is random so players must gamble on when to use Pep Powers.



» [PS4] *Dragon Quest XI* was the last main *DQ* game Sugiyama worked on before his death in 2021.

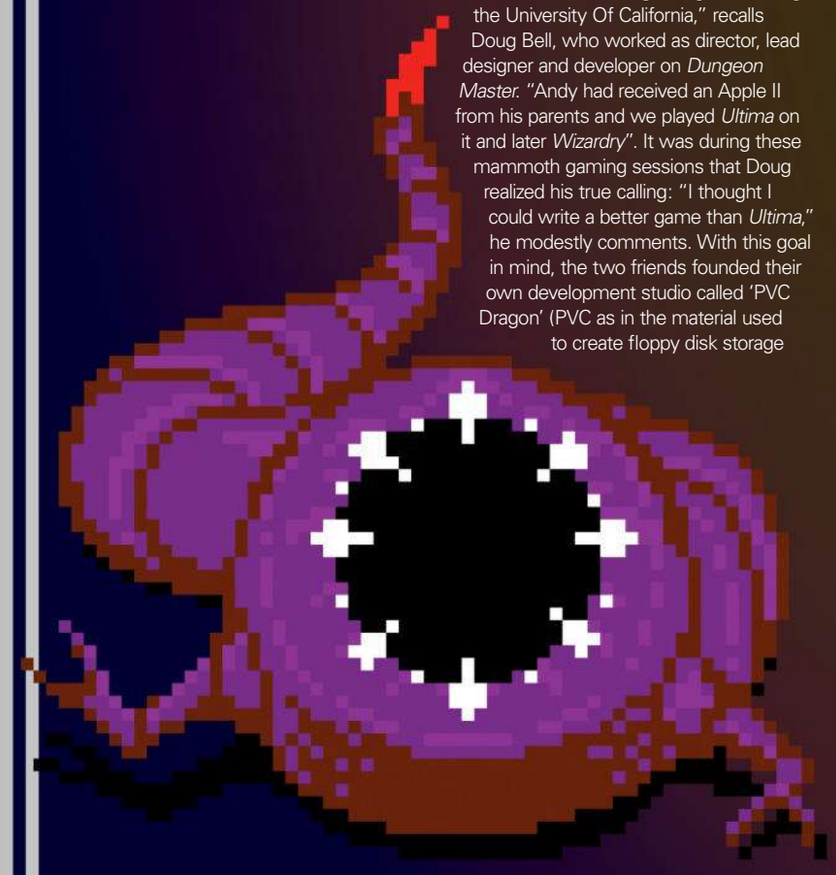
Dungeon Master

When tiny San Diego studio Faster Than Light released Dungeon Master on the Atari ST in 1987, they knew they had created something special. What they couldn't have predicted was the tremendous worldwide success the game would achieve and the impact it would have on future videogame design. We speak to the creator of this legendary title

Words By Damien McFerran

Like so many partnerships forged in the early days of the videogame industry, the team responsible for *Dungeon Master* came together at school. "Andy Jaros and I met during college, attending the University Of California," recalls Doug Bell, who worked as director, lead designer and developer on *Dungeon Master*. "Andy had received an Apple II from his parents and we played *Ultima* on it and later *Wizardry*". It was during these mammoth gaming sessions that Doug realized his true calling: "I thought I could write a better game than *Ultima*," he modestly comments. With this goal in mind, the two friends founded their own development studio called 'PVC Dragon' (PVC as in the material used to create floppy disk storage wallets). Raising capital by selling shares in the fledgling company to close friends and family, the intrepid duo started working on their all-conquering fantasy title, named *Crystal Dragon*. However, after two years of hard slog, the company coffers were running dry and a difficult decision had to be made. "We decided to see if another game company was interested in picking up our game," continues Doug. "We had recently moved to San Diego and contacted the local game companies, one of which was FTL, owned by Wayne Holder." The company, responsible for Apple II classic *SunDog: Frozen Legacy*, took the pair on board in 1983 on a temporary basis. "Wayne decided to take us on for a few months to get the game to a working state," Doug remembers.

A couple of months after joining FTL, Atari sent shock waves around the globe with the announcement of the ST home computer, and at FTL development on the Apple II version of *Crystal Dragon* was brought to an abrupt halt. "The Atari was a much more capable computer than the Apple, and better suited to *Crystal Dragon*, where we were spending a great deal of our time trying to fit it in the Apple's 64K" comments Doug about the new system. Unfortunately there simply wasn't enough time to port the work they



» Drinking fountains become more rare the further you progress.

had already done and complete the game in time for the debut of the new 16-bit machine. "We decided it was important to have a game at the launch of the ST, which was scheduled for late 1984" says Doug. "Wayne, Andy and I decided that porting *SunDog* was a better project than trying to develop a new game for the new platform". The team swiftly updated the sci-fi adventure for the 16-bit generation and the Atari ST version was released on Christmas Eve, 1984. A stunning game on the Apple II, it unsurprisingly replicated the tremendous success on Atari's shiny new home computer.

With one triumph and valuable experience of coding on the cutting edge ST under their collective belts, Doug and Andy became full time members of the FTL team and turned their attention back to *Crystal Dragon* – which had now been re-named *Dungeon Master*. The creative process called upon additional commitment in terms of programming – and the results were encouraging. "We started with a proof of concept to use a painter's algorithm (drawing from back to front) to create the dungeon," says Doug. "We wanted to see what the performance was, and it was okay, but we realized that we needed to switch from Pascal to C. I spend three weeks learning C and rewriting the dungeon crawl in C, and the performance was far better than we actually expected".

Compared to the sprawling development studios of today, the core team behind *Dungeon Master* was minuscule. "There were basically only five of us," recalls Doug. "Wayne did only a little of the programming – his biggest contribution was to figure out how to do digitized sound on the Atari's sound chip. Andy Jaros did all of the artwork. Mike Newton created the tools, including the DCS (Dungeon Construction Set). Dennis Walker and I did 90 per cent of the game programming." Each team member had their own responsibilities, but additional brainstorming was welcome, as Doug confirms: "We all contributed the ideas that set *Dungeon Master* apart from other games. I think some of the biggest conceptual contributions were probably made by Wayne, particularly with regards to the user interface".

> "THERE WERE BASICALLY ONLY FIVE OF US. DENNIS WALKER AND I DID 90 PER CENT OF THE GAME PROGRAMMING" DOUG BELL

The team soon became aware that they could expand the concept beyond the original *Crystal Dragon* brief. "The scope of the game was initially going to be less than what we ended up doing," comments Doug. "We had planned on releasing a game at the end of 1985, and in preparation for that, released a demo in May of 1985. Around September, we realized that we had the potential to create a landmark game, so we decided to expand the scope of the game and

» Doug Bell was the designer of *Dungeon Master* and also did programming on the hit game.

» *Dungeon Master 2* featured improved visuals and sound.

» *Dungeon Master Nexus* took the series into true 3D.

DEVELOPER HIGHLIGHTS

SUNDOG
SYSTEMS: APPLE II, ATARI ST
YEAR: 1984

OIDS
SYSTEMS: ATARI ST, APPLE MAC
YEAR: 1987

DUNGEON MASTER II
SYSTEMS: PC, AMIGA, PC-9821, PC-9081, APPLE MAC, MEGA CD, FM TOWNS
YEAR: (1993: JAPAN, 1995: WORLDWIDE)

OTHER VERSIONS

Theron's Quest
This PC Engine conversion is probably the most notable port as it deviated from the original title in a number of ways. Subtitled *Theron's Quest*, it is split into seven small dungeons, each of which contained puzzles and maps from the original home computer versions of *Dungeon Master* and *Chaos Strikes Back*. The most sweeping change is the introduction of an anime intro and storyline – the player assumes the character of a teenage boy proving his worth by defeating an evil force (a plot that should come as no surprise to any hardened JRPG fan). The final product is a very toned-down version of FTL's classic game, but is still worth seeking out.

Dungeon Master Nexus
Released in 1998 by Victor Interactive, *Dungeon Master Nexus* is a Japanese exclusive for the Sega Saturn. Developed entirely in Japan (where *Dungeon Master* has a massive following), the game is an admirable attempt to update the classic formula in 3D, but is hampered by the primitive graphic engine and slow, unresponsive controls. Most of the in-game text is in English and while it's not an especially expensive game, the limited print run means it is extremely hard to find these days.

» Mummy! Help!

» A Screamer from *Dungeon Master Nexus*.

▶ forgo the 1985 release". The extra time meant Doug and his team could achieve almost everything they had set out to do – a fairly unique event in videogame production: "There were some ideas we had to shelve, but for the most part we took the time to make the game as good as we could without being dictated too much by the schedule".

Dungeon Master would prove to be a tremendously immersive experience and boasted a degree of realism seldom seen in role-playing titles before or since. Characters required food, water and sleep to survive, torches were essential to light the dim passageways (and would burn themselves out after a period of time) and some enemies could be eaten once slain. However, as impressive as these elements seemed at the time, most had been on the drawing board since the early days of *Crystal Dragon*'s development and Doug feels that *Dungeon Master*'s merits actually lie elsewhere: "I think the user interface, graphics, sound and gameplay were what set us apart, and to a much lesser extent, the refinements of what previous dungeon games had done". Indeed, FTL's game was one of the first adventure titles to ditch the keyboard in favour of a fully mouse-driven interface. Another massive breakthrough was the fact that the game took place in 'real time' – role-playing games up to this point were almost always turn-based affairs – just like the tabletop games from which they took their inspiration.

> "I THINK IT'S SAFE TO SAY THAT NO GAME EVER GOT AS MUCH ONTO A 360K FLOPPY DISK" DOUG BELL

Although the enemies were gifted with only a handful of animation frames, *Dungeon Master* was a masterpiece of spooky setpieces and dripped with an oppressive atmosphere. "We wanted to create an immersive experience," states Doug. "That was the guiding principle behind having the action take place in the dungeon as much as possible. The scary aspect really just evolved from the fact that up to that point there had not been a real-time 3D dungeon game with the level of graphics and sound in *Dungeon Master*. Once you were sucked into the game it didn't take much to scare you". Anyone who has had the dubious pleasure of playing the game alone in a darkened room will agree.

This level of immersion was so cherished by Doug and his team that they didn't want anything to shatter it. "We were targeting the Atari 520 ST on an SS 360K floppy disk. We didn't want to have to interrupt the gameplay with disk swaps. A lot of the technology in *Dungeon Master* was spent on compression/decompression algorithms. When fully expanded, the game that fitted onto a single floppy disk was about 1.6M. There was a sophisticated memory manager that kept the graphics compressed in memory so that we could fit more." Doug is justifiably proud of his team's achievement in this regard: "I think it's safe to say that no game ever got as much onto a 360K floppy disk or into the Atari 520ST's memory as *Dungeon Master*".

Released in 1987, *Dungeon Master* won a raft of accolades and topped 'game of the year' charts in practically every videogame magazine of the time. It went on to become one of the best-selling 16-bit home computer games of all time and achieved an incredible 50% market penetration on the Atari ST alone. The success of the game was not lost on

» Scrolls reveal handy hints and various spells.

» Japanese advert for *Dungeon Master*.

» That pile of bones is one of your fallen champions.

"DUNGEON MASTER WAS DEVELOPED WITH THE IDEA OF CREATING MANY SCENARIOS" DOUG BELL

» Doors can be opened in a variety of ways.

rival developers, and companies such as Westwood Studios (*Eye Of The Beholder, Lands of Lore*), Mindscape (*Captive*), Sega (*Shining* and *The Darkness*) and Mirrorsoft (*Bloodwych*) tried to emulate the winning formula of FTL's title, with varying degrees of success. *Dungeon Master* was converted to different formats including the Amiga, Sharp X68000, PC, FM Towns, PC-9801 and Super Nintendo. An enhanced version with additional animation and sound was produced for Commodore's ill-fated CDTV, but development stalled (and was eventually cancelled) due to Commodore's failure to provide FTL with reliable information regarding save-game options on the machine.

Given the massive success of *Dungeon Master* it was inevitable that FTL would expand on the game in some way. "*Dungeon Master* was developed with the idea of creating many scenarios," continues Doug. The first of these expansion packs was *Chaos Strikes Back* – however, it bucked the trend of the time by being published as a standalone game that did not require the original to operate. Although it used the same game engine and many of the same enemy sprites, it proved to be an excellent title and things looked positive for future instalments along the same lines. Sadly, other commitments got in the way, much to Doug's chagrin. "One of my regrets is that we got so busy doing ports of the game that we didn't end up creating enough scenarios," he comments, mournfully.

» The entrance to the dungeon – anyone with sense would turn back now…

Chaos Strikes Back was a hit when it was published in 1989 and satisfied the hardcore *Dungeon Master* fans, but what everyone craved was a full-blown sequel. The wait was to be an excruciatingly protracted one. *Dungeon Master II: The Legend Of Skullkeep* had a lengthy development period and by the time it was eventually released in 1995 the goalposts had not so much been moved, but rather uprooted completely. The game retained the 2D visual style of the original, with the addition of outdoor locations and a more complex game engine. It was an excellent game, but lacked the visual polish to tempt people away from the new breed of 3D first-person adventure titles.

Although the sequel sold well and garnered some positive review scores, it was something of a letdown after the groundbreaking original. It would also prove to be FTL's final roll of the dice and the company ceased operations in 1996. Doug remained with them right up to the bitter end. When we spoke to him, he had left the games industry in favour of a career that is more suited to his lifestyle. "I'm a software architect for a company that develops software for the auto insurance claims industry," he explains. "It's quite boring compared to the game industry, but it also consumes far less of my time. I have two sons, nine and 12, and I spend a great deal of time with them… something I'm not sure was possible in the games industry". ✱

» The SNES port contained the Super FX chip – although it's hard to tell how it was used.

» Tree-like Screamers emit a high-pitched sound to inflict damage on you.

» The first in a sadly unfulfilled series.

» David R Darrow produced the stunning covers for *Dungeon Master* and *Chaos Strikes Back*.

THE HIS

FINAL F

FIRION

FINAL FANTASY II

■ Our very first named hero is the archetypical holder of the role – loyal to his family and country, with a strong desire to do what is necessary to protect them. Supposedly, he's got a bit of a weakness for women.

ONION KNIGHT

FINAL FANTASY III

■ Better known as Luneth to those who have played *Final Fantasy III*'s remake, this chap has courage in spades but is just a bit too eager to act at times. As the first character spoken to by the crystals, he becomes his party's de facto leader.

CECIL HARVEY

FINAL FANTASY IV

■ This former dark knight is neither arrogant nor outspoken, despite his role as one of the king's elite soldiers. He's a much better fit for his role once he questions his loyalties and becomes a paladin.

BARTZ KLAUSER

FINAL FANTASY V

■ Without much purpose other than wandering the world, Bartz is an easygoing soul whose life changes after his encounter with a crashed meteor. This multitalented hero has a notable fear of heights due to a childhood fall.

TERRA BRANFORD

FINAL FANTASY VI

■ *Final Fantasy*'s first female protagonist is a powerful esper whose abilities are hijacked for harm by the Empire. During her quest, she struggles to regain her memories and reconcile her humanity with her magical abilities.

CLOUD STRIFE

FINAL FANTASY VII

■ This mercenary isn't interested in much other than getting paid, until he hooks up with the environmentalist resistance group AVALANCHE and discovers that his past might not be what he thought it was.

HISTORY OF HEROES

TORY OF ANTASY

SQUALL LEONHART

FINAL FANTASY VIII

■ A loner at heart, Squall finds leadership thrust upon him as part of his duties in the SeeD military academy. Thanks to his rival, Seifer, he bears a rather distinctive facial scar.

ZIDANE TRIBAL

FINAL FANTASY IX

■ This diminutive thief is a real ladies' man who sets out to kidnap a princess. Confident and competent the majority of the time, any insecurities that he holds are generally things that he tries to deal with himself.

TIDUS

FINAL FANTASY X

■ As a Blitzball star, Tidus is athletic and upbeat to a fault, but he's got some rather severe daddy issues. He's also a pretty handy swordsman, and has a laugh that has made him famous all over the world.

VAAN

FINAL FANTASY XII

■ Being the self-appointed guardian of a group of orphans, Vaan is a natural leader. A life of poverty hasn't ground him down, and he's a bit of a dreamer, constantly thinking of the day he'll own an airship.

LIGHTNING

FINAL FANTASY XIII

■ This determined, fierce hero is bound up in a quest to save her sister, Serah. She's a rollercoaster of emotions, too – initially cold and distant, she opens up in the second game of the *Final Fantasy XIII* trilogy only to lose her emotions again.

NOCTIS LUCIS CAELUM

FINAL FANTASY XV

■ Heir to the kingdom of Lucis, Noctis is the son of King Regis, and has to deal with the aftermath of a coup. He's aloof and prickly, but his heart is in the right place. He's supported and constantly propped-up by his three good friends.

FANTASY ON FILM

There's more to Final Fantasy than videogames – check out these excursions into the world of cinema

With *Final Fantasy* games offering more plot depth than the typical videogame, particularly during the early years of the series' history, there's some sense to adapting them to film – but straight adaptations have actually been few and far between.

Final Fantasy's first foray into the movie market came with the 1994 release of *Final Fantasy: Legend Of The Crystals*, a four-part anime video series that followed the events of *Final Fantasy V*, albeit 200 years in the future with mostly new characters. This one's not very easy to find anymore – the only English language release was a North American VHS run back in the late Nineties. An even more tenuous connection is found in the anime series *Final Fantasy Unlimited*, a 2001 series that borrows some elements, such as Moogles, without relating to any particular game.

Final Fantasy: The Spirits Within wasn't based on a game, and was far more ambitious. Directed by Hironobu Sakaguchi and released by in-house group Square Pictures, the tale of a future Earth ravaged by aliens was one of the first films to attempt photorealistic CGI depiction of humans. Despite impressive scenes and an A-list voice cast, it only made $85 million at the box office in 2001 – not nearly enough to recoup the film's production budget of $137 million.

A more modest CGI effort followed in the form of *Final Fantasy VII: Advent Children*, a direct follow-up to the videogame that arrived in 2005. Released straight to DVD, this features many of the characters from the original in a world now ravaged by the mysterious Geostigma. This was a big seller, leading to a special extended Blu-Ray edition in 2010. In 2016, another CGI movie titled *Kingsglaive: Final Fantasy XV* and a free anime series titled *Brotherhood: Final Fantasy XV* served to expand the universe of the 15th game.

WITH OVER 100 MILLION GAMES SOLD, FINAL FANTASY IS A PILLAR OF THE JAPANESE RPG SCENE. NICK THORPE LOOKS BACK OVER THREE DECADES OF THE ICONIC SERIES WITH SHINJI HASHIMOTO

There are few series of games that are unavoidably big but *Final Fantasy* is definitely one of them. Even if you've somehow missed all of the main entries in the series, there are the spinoffs, the cameos and even films to talk about. With over 100 million games sold, discussing Japanese RPGs without including *Final Fantasy* is like excluding *Mario* from a conversation about platform games, or ignoring *Street Fighter* in a chat about fighting games.

In 1987, Squaresoft was anything but unavoidably big. It was struggling to make headway as a publisher on Nintendo's market-conquering Famicom, during a time when the platform was at its most lucrative. With little money, the company was in a jam – but then, so was game designer Hironobu Sakaguchi. His previous games hadn't hit major commercial success, and he was contemplating leaving the games industry to return to university. He had wanted to create a role-playing game, and met resistance from management. External events would break down barriers for Sakaguchi, as the success of Enix's Famicom RPG *Dragon Quest* proved that the market for a console RPG existed.

Even then, putting the game together was no simple task. Sakaguchi has confided that his internal reputation hampered his initial attempts to form a team for the '*Fighting Fantasy*' project – he was considered a rough boss, and as his games struggled to sell, staff opted for other teams. Just three people joined his team initially, and he had to put out feelers before gaining key members of the team, such as game designers Koichi Ishii and Akitoshi Kawazu. Programming was handled by new hire Nasir Gebelli, who had taken the Apple II scene by storm with his action games. Yoshitaka Amano, who provided character designs, had been a freelancer before joining Square for *Final Fantasy*; Sakaguchi has said that he had dismissed Ishii's suggestion to use Amano due to failing to recognise the name, only to be told that the magazine clippings he'd been using for inspiration were Amano's work.

» [NES] The Warriors Of Light do battle against a sparse backdrop in the very first *Final Fantasy*.

> "FINAL FANTASY DOES NOT SIMPLY TRY TO EMULATE AND BUILD ON THE PREVIOUS TITLES IN THE SERIES"
>
> SHINJI HASHIMOTO

» [Famicom] Work started on a translation of *Final Fantasy II*, but was abandoned due to concerns over release timing.

When the resulting game finally made it to market in December 1987, it was known as *Final Fantasy* – a name change necessitated by the existence of the *Fighting Fantasy* gamebooks, with the word 'Final' chosen due to the precarious position of both Sakaguchi and Squaresoft. However, the market was ready for a new RPG, and *Final Fantasy* had key advantages over the likes of *Dragon Quest*, particularly when it came to its more elaborately told plot, which involved the Warriors Of Light banding together to battle the evil knight Garland. Instead of playing as a single hero, *Final Fantasy* allowed the player to form a four-character party from six character classes with unique attributes and abilities – Warrior, Thief, Monk, Black Mage, White Mage and Red Mage. The game was a swift success, selling 400,000 copies on the Famicom, paving the way for an MSX2 conversion in 1989 and an English translation for the NES in 1990.

When the time came for a sequel, Squaresoft took some unusual steps that would come to be recognised as part of the *Final Fantasy* design philosophy.

» [Famicom] *Final Fantasy III* holds the record for longest time between release and English translation, at 16 years.

"*Final Fantasy* does not simply try to emulate and build on the previous titles in the series, but to exceed and reach beyond them with every possible effort, so in that sense developing each and every game in the series is a very big challenge in itself," explains Shinji Hashimoto, *Final Fantasy* brand manager at Square Enix. The first major change was that the game did away with the experience points system from the original (and many other RPGs). Instead, characters developed their attributes through practical use – a character could increase its magic statistic by casting many spells, for example.

The more radical change was the decision to omit all of the characters and settings from the original game, in favour of a new setting in which the characters were named and had defined histories. This followed Firion and his party, who find themselves attacked by the forces of Palamecia. This decision would set a precedent for the series – each subsequent game would also start afresh, leading to a series of disconnected stories bound together by an evolving role-playing game design. This would turn out to be one of the series' greatest strengths, as the designers have had the freedom to adapt to changing market trends with their characters and settings.

This disconnect between the games has also given rise to an interesting phenomenon – while most other series of games include their fan favourites and black sheep, *Final Fantasy* fans are incredibly passionate about their particular favourites within the series. In fact, this is something that Hashimoto agrees with. When asked about the series' key rivals, he responds: "I think it is very difficult to compare *Final Fantasy* to other games. If I had to give one then I would say that the other numbered *Final Fantasy* games are all each other's rivals!"

» [Famicom] Your entire party starts off as Onion Knights in *Final Fantasy III*, but can soon change jobs.

Final Fantasy II was an even bigger hit than its predecessor in Japan, shifting 800,000 copies following its December 1988 release. Unfortunately, *Final Fantasy II* didn't make it to the west. Though Square Enix had started work on a translation following the success of the original game, the late start ultimately doomed it. Progress was slow, the game was ageing, and the SNES was on the horizon, so it was ultimately scrapped. western players would finally get to play it as part of the PlayStation compilation *Final Fantasy Origins* in 2003.

The same fate befell the next game, *Final Fantasy III*. This game centred on four orphans who are tasked with restoring balance to the world, which they seek to do by defeating Xande,

» [SNES] Mid-battle dialogue can turn what seems to be a hostile encounter into a gut-wrenching moment.

» [SNES] Bartz and Lenna find an old man passed out by the meteor impact site.

» [PlayStation] Some people weren't used to emotional content in gaming – Aeris and her fate served as a sudden introduction.

» [SNES] *Final Fantasy VI* was a visual upgrade over its predecessors, with more detailed background work.

▶ a warlock whose goal is to gain crystals of light and unleash chaos upon the world. Unusually, each of your characters in *Final Fantasy III* begins the game as an Onion Knight, but can switch jobs freely during the course of the game, allowing a wide range of character and class combinations.

Despite a disruption caused by the expiration of Nasir Gebelli's work visa, which forced the team to relocate to the USA to finish the game, *Final Fantasy III* was the most advanced game in the series so far, shipping on a four megabit cartridge when it released in April 1990. The series was still growing, with 500,000 copies sold in the first week and 1.4 million copies sold in total. Despite being one of the most popular entries in the series among Japanese fans, remake projects faltered until a full 3D Nintendo DS remake in 2006, which opened the game to western players a mere 16 years after its initial release.

Another crucial part of the *Final Fantasy* identity is the constant push for bigger and better technology. "We have always tried to be at the cutting edge of gaming in each era, going from 2D pixel sprites to 3D, and from prerendering to real-time," explains Hashimoto. "The media our games are on has also followed the trends in hardware, going from ROM cassettes through CD-ROM to DVD-ROM, Blu-ray and even branching into smartphones." This drive would define *Final Fantasy IV*, which became the first entry in the series to debut on the SNES.

» [SNES] The US SNES version of *Final Fantasy VI* was the last to use western numbering – everyone synchronised at *VII*.

"WE HAVE ALWAYS TRIED TO BE AT THE CUTTING EDGE OF GAMING IN EACH ERA"
SHINJI HASHIMOTO

***Final Fantasy IV* featured characters with fixed classes, and centres around Cecil Harvey, who begins the game as a member of the Kingdom of Baron's elite Red Wings air force unit.** The battle system in this game received an overhaul, with turn-based combat giving way to a system that Square termed 'Active Time Battle' – menu-driven combat taking place in real time, with enemies capable of launching attacks even as you decide on your next move. This exciting system would carry forward to many of Square's other RPGs, including *Final Fantasy* games. Technologically, the game took advantage of the enhanced colour palette of the SNES, and used Mode 7 effects to create spectacular battle animations and spice up airship sequences.

Despite having to adjust to working with brand-new technology, Square's team was able to complete *Final Fantasy IV* in just one year, meaning that the game arrived in July 1991, during the Super Famicom's launch year. 1.44 million copies were sold, reviews were highly positive, and it has retained a great deal of popularity over time, with *Famitsu* readers voting it the sixth best game of all time in 2006. *Final Fantasy IV* was also the game that marked *Final Fantasy*'s return to the west – however, it was named *Final Fantasy II* so as not to confuse American audiences, which had missed the previous two games. Unfortunately, the game was also simplified due to Square's concerns that it would be too large of a leap in complexity. A number of spells, items

A LITTLE DISTRACTION

Though the heroes of the Final Fantasy series are busy saving the world, they can always find time for minigames. Here are five of the best

G-BIKE

FINAL FANTASY VII

■ To be fair to Cloud and company, the initial G-Bike segment of *Final Fantasy VII* is a genuine life or death escape from Shinra headquarters. Playing it again in the Gold Saucer is pretty frivolous though, as was the standalone mobile version.

TRIPLE TRIAD

FINAL FANTASY VIII

■ It's not exactly *Magic: The Gathering*, but *Final Fantasy VIII* has its own well-loved collectible card game that shines pretty brightly. Players take turns to place cards on a three-by-three grid, with directional attack statistics causing cards to be won and lost.

BLITZBALL

FINAL FANTASY X

■ If you're going to make your protagonist a fictional sports star, you might as well let the players play that fictional sport while you're at it. While Blitzball gameplay isn't the all-action affair you'd expect from its FMV depiction, it's a fun diversion all the same.

and abilities were removed – including the consolidation of various status healing items into one catch-all remedy – items were made cheaper, and secret passages were made visible. Fans should seek out one of the more recent re-releases instead.

Final Fantasy V followed the story of Bartz Klauser, a wanderer who becomes wrapped up in a royal family's quest after happening upon a meteorite that had struck the planet. Mechanically, the biggest thing about *Final Fantasy V* is its incredibly expansive job system – you can assign one of 22 classes to any member of your party, giving you more choice than any other game in the series thus far.

When it was released in December 1992, *Final Fantasy V* became the series' bestselling game in Japan by selling 2.45 million copies. Unfortunately, *Final Fantasy V* was the third game not to receive a timely English translation. Though it was being worked on, Square once again felt that difficulty was an issue – translator Ted Woolsey told *Super Play* that "although the more experienced gamers loved the complex character building, it's just not accessible enough to the average gamer".

***Final Fantasy V* was also the first game in the series to spawn a direct spinoff story, in the form of an anime video series titled *Final Fantasy: Legend Of The Crystals*.** However, this was another major step in establishing the identity of the *Final Fantasy* series – spinoffs have become as big a deal as the main games themselves, and they've proven incredibly versatile. "That is probably because the series has such a strong foundation in the first place and fans have such positive memories of the worlds and characters in them that they always want to spend more time there," Hashimoto assures us. Indeed, the number of non-crossover spinoffs lends weight to his argument – many characters and stories have even returned for their own individual follow-up projects, including the likes of the episodic game *Final Fantasy IV: The After Years*, the handheld sequel *Final Fantasy XII: Revenant Wings* and the CGI movie *Final Fantasy VII: Advent Children*.

Final Fantasy VI was the final game of the SNES era and one that started to shift the series away from traditional high-fantasy settings towards more sci-fi-influenced worlds – technological advances on display in the game's world include trains and drills, as well as coal mining. The story follows Terra Branford, a human-esper rescued from her Imperial captors by a resistance group. Technical advances over the previous SNES games were limited, and character customisation was once again simplified, allowing for characters to add equipment rather than going through job changes. Still, the game was exceptionally well-crafted, with amazing music, a lengthy main quest and memorable characters, particularly the main villain, Kefka Palazzo. 2.62 million copies shifted in Japan following the game's April 1994 release, and a further 860,000 were sold in North America.

Though the first six games were obviously successful, *Final Fantasy* had been primarily a Japanese phenomenon for the first decade of its life. North America had received patchy support, and Europe hadn't been let in on the fun at all. This would all change with the introduction of *Final Fantasy VII*. It was an important game in many respects – it introduced 3D models and FMV to the *Final Fantasy* series, and marked the series' proper debut in Europe. Perhaps most significantly,

» [PlayStation] *Final Fantasy IX* was the last of the highly stylised games, and used humour liberally.

» [PlayStation] Custom scenes like this were only possible with the adoption of 3D character models.

CHOCOBO RACING

FINAL FANTASY XIV

■ The MMORPG isn't the first game to allow players to race the iconic birds of the *Final Fantasy* series, but unlike previous incarnations, it allows you to beat other players with your expertly trained Chocobo – that's worth the price of admission alone.

FISHING

FINAL FANTASY XV

■ In a game where 'hanging out with the guys' seems to be a major driving factor, fishing is an obvious inclusion. This is another minigame spun off into a standalone production, with *Monster Of The Deep: Final Fantasy XV* for PlayStation VR.

» [PlayStation] *Final Fantasy IX* had well and truly pushed the PlayStation to its limits, with no room left for technical improvement.

» [PS2] Rikku and Yuna took the lead in *Final Fantasy X-2*, the first direct videogame sequel to a *Final Fantasy* game.

» [PC] The first *Final Fantasy* MMO introduced drastic changes to everything, from the combat system to the storytelling.

Gessho : Ah, I must introduce myself.
My name is Gessho, and I have also arrived from the western continent.
Gessho : I am a Yagudo.
Gessho : Do not be alarmed.
I am merely a wandering monk who seeks to find a master in this foreign nation.
Gessho : Just like you, I have entered the service of one "Naja Salaheem"...

it marked the end of Squaresoft's historic link with Nintendo and the start of a strong relationship with Sony. *Final Fantasy VII* was set to be an epic and needed the massive storage afforded by CD-ROMs, a requirement at odds with Nintendo's decision to stick with cartridges for the N64.

It's fair to say that *Final Fantasy VII* revolutionised RPG production values. The basic elements of adventure, swords and sorcery remained, but where previous games had expressed this through small sprites and top-down or isometric viewpoints, *Final Fantasy VII* added previously unseen cinematic ambition. The use of polygonal characters on prerendered backdrops allowed for stunning wide shots of industrial facilities, claustrophobic close-ups in tight corridors, and even sequences overlaid on FMV. In the west, *Final Fantasy VII* blew away the stereotypical view of Japanese RPGs with an attractive sci-fi narrative. Critical acclaim followed, along with 10 million sales, making it the most popular game in the series.

For Hashimoto, it was a formative first experience with the series. "I have attachments to all the *Final Fantasy* games but the first one that I was actually involved in developing was *Final Fantasy VII*. *Final Fantasy VII* has some very strong memories for me. As well as the game itself, I was also involved

BHUJERBAN SAINIKAH
YOU MAY SEE IMPERIALS ON OUR STREETS, BHADRA,
BUT DO NOT BE ALARMED. BHUJERBA IS NEUTRAL.
OUR PORTS ARE OPEN TO ALL.

» [PS2] Vaan certainly wouldn't want to see Imperials – he kind of hates them after they killed his brother.

with the movie, and it was a very happy experience being able to take that to the Venice International Film festival."

With a brand-new audience captured, *Final Fantasy VIII* became the most highly anticipated entry in the series so far. The game signified some major changes for the *Final Fantasy* series, particularly in terms of artistic direction. Instead of the highly stylised character designs in past games, *Final Fantasy VIII* used realistic depictions of humans in all scenes. The game's plot followed Squall Leonhart and his fellow cadets from the SeeD military force, who start out by turning back advances from the hostile Republic of Galbadia.

Magic points were dropped from the battle system, with characters instead required to 'draw' spells from points around the world, as well as enemies. Magic could also be tied to your statistics via the Junction system, allowing you to stockpile spells to raise your stats. This ultimately proved to be somewhat broken, allowing players to build extraordinarily powerful characters too quickly.

Though critics loved it, *Final Fantasy VIII* can be a polarising game. Some of the millions who bought it in 1999 found themselves alienated by the new visual style and changes to the battle system. However, the game's fans will point to its incredible cinematic sequences, compelling (if convoluted) plot, and strong customisation elements as key qualities. 3.7 million copies were sold in Japan and 4.45 million elsewhere, which suggests that those fans might just be onto something.

The next three games in the series were all announced simultaneously, and were drastically different. *Final Fantasy IX* was a celebration of the past, offering one last set of stylised character designs in a classic kingdom setting – a merging of the old style of games with the latest production values. As the thief Zidane

» [PS2] *Final Fantasy XII*'s battle system was controversial, with some fans accusing the game of playing itself.

> "THE FIRST [FINAL FANTASY GAME] THAT I WAS ACTUALLY INVOLVED IN DEVELOPING WAS FINAL FANTASY VII"
>
> SHINJI HASHIMOTO

» [PC] Since its relaunch, *FFXIV* has become a sprawling epic with success after success under its belt.

Tribal, you end up taking in Alexandria's princess Garnet after attempting to kidnap her, only to find that she's worried by Queen Brahne and will join you willingly. Classic character classes return and characters can gain permanent skills from equipment.

With 5.3 million copies sold worldwide, *Final Fantasy IX* is less popular than its PlayStation predecessors, despite critical consensus holding it as arguably the best *Final Fantasy* game overall. Part of this can be attributed to the series falling behind technological progress for the first time, because it arrived during the peak of PlayStation 2 hype, and people were already looking ahead to the game's successor.

Final Fantasy X was an exploitation of increased power in the present. While the game was very much a traditionally structured entry in the *Final Fantasy* series, the arrival of the PlayStation 2 gave Square access to sufficient graphical power to move away from prerendered backgrounds, replacing them with realtime 3D environments. Additionally, the large capacity of DVDs allowed for the introduction of voice acting. The game follows Tidus, a Blitzball star in his native Zanarkand, who finds himself stranded in a place called Spira following the appearance of a destructive beast known as Sin. *Final Fantasy X* sold an enormous 6.6 million copies worldwide following its July 2001 release, and in 2006 *Famitsu* readers voted it the best game of all time.

Final Fantasy XI took the series in a whole new direction, as the first massively multiplayer online RPG in the series. Players are allowed to create their

» [PS3] *Final Fantasy XIII* polarised fans with its streamlined first act and reinvented battle system.

own characters and wander freely around the world of Vana'diel, banding together with others to complete missions and advance the story. The initial antagonist was the resurrected Shadow Lord, who needed to be defeated, but years of expansions and add-on content have shifted the focus of the storyline. The game was primarily developed for the PC and released in 2002, but gained cross-platform support with the PlayStation 2, and then an Xbox 360 version followed in 2006.

Numbering *Final Fantasy XI* as part of the main series was a bold move, but one that showed confidence in the game and ultimately paid off handsomely. The game reached break-even at 200,000 monthly subscribers, and had up to 300,000 daily players during 2003. In 2012, Square Enix announced that the game was the most profitable *Final Fantasy* title of all, and although the PS2 and Xbox 360 servers have been closed, the PC servers are still active, ensuring its status as one of the longest-running MMORPGs.

In the modern era, Square Enix has spent more time exploring the universes it has established. *Final Fantasy XII* was followed up very quickly with a handheld sequel, *Revenant Wings*, and Xbox ▶

FLIGHTS OF FANTASY

We investigate the many spinoffs of the Final Fantasy universe

CRYSTAL CHRONICLES

FIRST RELEASE: **2003**

■ First released on the GameCube and developed by The Game Designers Studio, *Crystal Chronicles* not only boasted extensive GBA compatibility, but it also featured real-time fighting that instantly made it stand apart from the core *Final Fantasy* games.

The series has continued to evolve with subsequent releases, such as *My Life As A King*, which introduced city building, and *My Life As A Darklord*, which was a well-regarded tower defence game. The 2007 *Ring Of Fates* was a standalone release for the Nintendo DS, while the 2009 Wii exclusive, *The Crystal Bearers*, was the last current game in the series to be released.

CHOCOBO GAMES

FIRST RELEASE: **1997**

■ Although the series has received more games than any other *Final Fantasy* spinoff, only a handful were released outside of Japan. The first game in the series, *Chocobo's Mysterious Dungeon*, never arrived in the West, although we did get to enjoy the 1999 sequel, *Chocobo's Dungeon 2. Chocobo Racing* was a decent-ish stab at a *Mario Kart* racer, while *Final Fantasy Fables: Chocobo Tales* for the DS was a card-based RPG that received a Japanese-exclusive sequel.

Final Fantasy Fables: Chocobo's Dungeon improved on the original *Chocobo Dungeon* formula by adding new mechanics, like a job system, while *Chocobo Panic* was a bizarre variant on the old electronic game, *Simon*.

MANA SERIES

FIRST RELEASE: **1991**

■ This is an odd inclusion but we're including it due to its origins. Known as *Seiken Densetsu: Final Fantasy Gaiden* in Japan, this Game Boy spinoff was called *Final Fantasy Adventure* in the states and *Mystic Quest* in Europe. Highly regarded as one of the best action games on Nintendo's portable, it eventually led to the critically-acclaimed *Secret Of Mana* in 1993. The series continued to move away from the *Final Fantasy* elements found in the original game, and is now considered a franchise in its own right.

Interestingly, the last released game was *Adventures Of Mana* in 2016 for iOS and PS Vita, which was essentially a 3D remake of the original game.

FINAL FANTASY TACTICS

FIRST RELEASE: **1997**

■ Unlike other *Final Fantasy* games, those in the *Tactics* series are strategy RPGs and very good ones at that. The original game was released on PlayStation in 1997 and was critically received at the time. It was eventually updated in the form of *Final Fantasy Tactics: The War Of The Lions* for PSP, and later iOS and Android.

Final Fantasy Tactics Advance followed on Game Boy Advance in 2003. It's not an actual sequel and is set in a dream world alternative of Ivalice. Its DS sequel, *Grimoire Of The Rift*, is actually set in the real version of Ivalice. The last game in the series, *Final Fantasy Tactics S*, was released in 2013 for iOS and Android, but closed its servers the following year.

CRYSTAL DEFENDERS

FIRST RELEASE: **2008**

■ Originally known as *Crystal Guardians*, this interesting tower defence series started off life by being released on three separate mobile services in Japan, before eventually being consolidated and released on iOS (and later, Xbox 360 and PS3) as *Crystal Defenders*. As with *Final Fantasy Tactics Advance* and its DS sequel, *Crystal Defenders* is set in *Final Fantasy XII*'s world of Ivalice, and features extremely distinctive artwork. A sequel, *Crystal Defenders: Vanguard Storm*, followed in 2009, which was specifically designed to work with a touch screen, and introduced new mechanics, including a fun take on 'rock-paper-scissors'. No additional games are currently planned.

DISSIDIA FINAL FANTASY

FIRST RELEASE: **2008**

■ *Dissidia* settles one of *Final Fantasy*'s biggest arguments: who would win in a fight between Cloud Strife and Squall Lionheart? It also answers many other hypothetical matches, as it allows a huge number of popular characters from the first ten games in the series (with one additional hero from *FFXI* and *FFXII*) to battle each other in arena-based combat.

Dissidia 012 Final Fantasy followed in 2011 and acted as both a prequel and a remake and introduced nine additional characters and tweaked many of the existing abilities of existing heroes. The most recent game, *Dissidia Final Fantasy*, was released in arcades in 2015 and appeared on PS4 later as *Dissidia NT*.

KINGDOM HEARTS

FIRST RELEASE: **2002**

■ A chance meeting in an elevator led to one of the most popular crossovers of recent memory. Joining Disney characters with those from the worlds of *Final Fantasy* seems an odd decision, but it works well. The original game sets the scene, introducing new characters – Sora, Riku and Kairi – and having them interact with some of Disney's biggest movies, from *The Little Mermaid* to *Tarzan*.

A core sequel, *Kingdom Hearts II*, was released in 2005 and *Kingdom Hearts III* followed in 2018, but there are also countless minisequels and prequels as well as several HD remakes that can make it a little bewildering to those who haven't followed the series.

SAGA SERIES

FIRST RELEASE: **1989**

■ This is another series that started off as a *Final Fantasy* spinoff before forming into its own standalone series. The two Game Boy sequels were eventually remade for the Nintendo DS, but were exclusive to Japan. The next three games were exclusive to the Super Famicom and were known as *Romancing SaGa 1-3*. *SaGa Frontier 1* and *2* were exclusive to PlayStation, while *Unlimited SaGa* and *Romancing SaGa: Minstrel Song* (an enhanced remake) debuted on the PS2. *Emperors SaGa* followed in 2012, which was exclusively for the GREE platform, while *Imperial SaGa* was exclusive to PC. The most recent game, *SaGa: Scarlet Grace*, was released for the PS Vita in 2016.

THEATRHYTHM

FIRST RELEASE: **2012**

■ Considering how famed the *Final Fantasy* series is for its music, we're surprised it took so long for a rhythm action game to receive a release. Developed by indieszero, it works as a brilliant slice of fan service, delivering some of the franchise's biggest tunes and marrying them to a number of entertaining game modes. A quasi-sequel, *Theatrhythm Final Fantasy: Curtain Call*, was released in 2014, and enhanced the base game and introduced a new mode called Medley Quests. It also featured 221 songs and 60 characters, with additional ones being available in the form of DLC. The most recent game in the series focuses on *Dragon Quest*.

WORLD OF FINAL FANTASY

FIRST RELEASE: **2016**

■ Tose, Division 3 and Square Enix Business worked together on *World Of Final Fantasy* as a celebration of the franchise's 30th anniversary. As with the *Kingdom Hearts* series, it features new protagonists (Lann and Reynn) but has them interact with a large number of classic *Final Fantasy* characters and monsters from throughout the franchise's history.

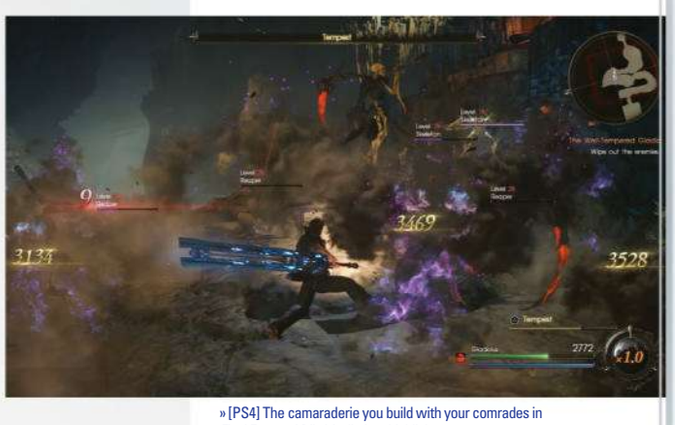
Set in the world of Grymoire, it features a distinctive chibi-like style, which some may find a little too cute for their tastes. It works well, however, ensuring the likes of Cloud Strife and Lightning are instantly recognisable. It's notable for having a long development period, so the localisation could be as close to the original Japanese dialogue as possible.

360 and PlayStation 3 owners were catered to with the *Final Fantasy XIII* series, a trilogy of games released between 2009 and 2014 with Lightning as the heroic figurehead.

The *Final Fantasy XIII* trilogy was particularly interesting to watch, as the gameplay changed quite a lot between each instalment. While *Final Fantasy XIII* did well with critics, it was roundly criticised for its linearity and Lightning's cold personality. "We do take on board the opinions of our fans, but at the same time we balance that with the unique personality and vision of each episode's director and make full use of those as well," notes Hashimoto. The results of that listening process were *Final Fantasy XIII-2*, a less linear game with a reduced emphasis on Lightning, and *Lightning Returns: Final Fantasy XIII*, an open world game that gives the player full choice over the quests they take and a real-time combat system. Despite these changes, neither game did quite as well as the original with critics.

Another game that came in for criticism was *Final Fantasy XIV*, the second MMORPG entry in the series set in the world of Eorzea. The initial response to the game in 2010 was incredibly poor, based on its gameplay and interface. Square Enix responded by dropping the game's fees completely and making improvements, but it wasn't enough – eventually, the servers were shuttered in 2012, and the game was replaced in 2013 with *Final Fantasy XIV: A Realm Reborn*, a supremely better version which has surpassed even *World Of Warcraft* in active users.

That's a non-traditional solution to a bad game, but it's fair to say that after 35 years, it's clear that *Final Fantasy* can forge its own path without being beholden to history. 2016's *Final Fantasy XV* is a great example of that – if you brought a *Final Fantasy* fan from the late Eighties to the present day, the Xbox One and PS4 game would be practically unrecognisable to them, given that the common image is a bunch of guys driving around in a car. Yet the open structure, contemporary clothing styles and real-time combat all make sense when you look at how the series has developed over the last three decades, and it's plain to see that people who became hooked on *Final Fantasy* many years ago are still going along for the ride with Square Enix.



» [PS4] The camaraderie you build with your comrades in *Final Fantasy XV* is it's distinct highlight.

> "WE DO TAKE ON BOARD THE OPINIONS OF OUR FANS, BUT AT THE SAME TIME WE BALANCE THAT WITH THE UNIQUE PERSONALITY AND VISION OF EACH EPISODE'S DIRECTOR"
>
> SHINJI HASHIMOTO

» [PS5] *Final Fantasy XVI* marked a paradigm shift into the world of action and away from classic RPG battling.

So, how does Hashimoto see the series now it has flown past its 30th anniversary? "It would be easy to sum up those 30 years in some way, but I really could not even begin to talk about the series without mentioning the sheer passion and ability of all the talented creators that have worked on *Final Fantasy* over its lifetime," he says, offering credit to the development teams. Although it can be debated which individual elements have most heavily driven the success of the series, for Hashimoto there's no individual unique selling point. "I think that one of *Final Fantasy*'s biggest strengths is that sheer energy that comes through when you combine all the different elements together: the characters, the story, CG and music etc.."

Indeed, while *Final Fantasy* has adapted to changing tastes over the years, the desire for it to be at the forefront of the Japanese RPG market has never wavered. "The *Final Fantasy* series will continue to be a hungry contender, always taking on new challenges and pushing for the top. Nobody knows what the future holds but I think that the series will continue to produce unique and imaginative games," Hashimoto concludes. Given the experiences that philosophy has produced over the last 35 years, we'll definitely be keeping our eyes on *Final Fantasy* over the years to come.

THE Bluffer's guide TO

Dungeons & Dragons

Its devoted fans have seen unrivalled derision, its games have caused moral panic and it is now in its fifth edition. Through all this, D&D still remains computer and pen and paper role-playing gaming's de facto brand. Let's take a look at the videogame influence that this epic platform inspired

Words By Craig Ritchie

Created in 1974 by Gary Gygax and Dave Arneson and published by the now-defunct gaming giant TSR, the clearly Tolkien-inspired *Dungeons & Dragons* brought a high fantasy element to a hobby that was primarily the domain of serious wargame and strategy titles, along with the complexity essential to those genres. Computers provide a perfect means of removing the note-keeping, dice rolling and inventory management which can be time-consuming, yet, endearing elements of the pen-and-paper original. It's handy, then, that a Venn diagram of *D&D* players and computer enthusiasts looks like a single circle – so of course they were the ones to first implement computerised versions of the early ruleset. Unlicensed fan products appeared as far back as 1975, the most well-known of these being *pedit5*, *dnd* and *Dungeon*. Programmed on PLATO and PDP-10 mainframes, *pedit5* was the earliest of the lot, coded in about a month by Rusty Rutherford, and it holds the honour of being the first computer role-playing game ever.

By the early Eighties the view of the gaming landscape was pretty clear: titles such as *Akalabeth*, *Ultima* and *Wizardry* were scratching the role-playing itch, but gamers were ready for more. The

The Bluffer's Guide to Dungeons & Dragons

KNOW YOUR DUNGEONS & DRAGONS

SAVING THROWS

■ These are dice rolls which are checked against character stats to determine whether an offensive spell was successful, a trap managed to cause damage and so on.

ARMOR CLASS

■ Represented by a number that through various *D&D* editions has gone from lower is better to higher is better, AC is the overall measure of how difficult something is to hit.

POLYHEDRAL DICE

■ The randomness that is fundamental to the franchise is thanks to *D&D*'s dice collection, ranging from four-sided through to twenty-sided. Got to roll those nat-20s!

ATTRIBUTE SCORES

■ These are the building blocks of your characters, from their Strength and Dexterity to their Wisdom and Charisma, and they also affect bonuses and penalties and so on.

FEATS

■ Introduced in 3rd Edition, a wide variety of Feats added more customisabilty to one's characters, who could now use a range of new special abilities.

EDITIONS

■ The various official incarnations of the ruleset have changed over the decades, each edition bringing new refinements and rule changes both loved and loathed by fans.

PROFICIENCIES

■ Effective weapon use requires training and practice, and *D&D* accounts for this by requiring one to select which weapons to master when levelling up.

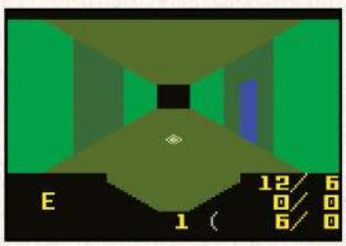
EXPERIENCE POINTS

■ The foundation of character progression awarded when killing enemies or completing quests, experience points, or XP, are now a stable in almost all RPGs.

officially licensed *D&D* games released by Mattel for the Intellivision were simplistic games that shared the franchise name but were not actual implementations of the *D&D* ruleset at all. This changed in the mid-Eighties, and after close to a decade of waiting, the great videogaming leap forward for *D&D* would finally come when TSR announced it would be taking bids for the videogame's licence.

SSI, who had made a name for itself as a developer and publisher of serious wargame and strategy titles had already started to dabble in RPGs such as the *Phantasie* and *Questron* series, and it wanted a crack at the *D&D* licence. It was its relationship with a fledgling studio in Las Vegas called Westwood – and its timely showing off of a demo of an unrelated game – that would lead to SSI taking home the gold despite bids from some of the biggest names in the videogaming industry.

"Westwood was only a handful of people at the time," says Louis Castle, cofounder of Westwood Studios and now head of Relentless Studios, "maybe six or seven of us. The demo, including the art and tools, was my one-man job. I had just completed work on some of the Epyx titles and was starting to work on the original game, *The Mars Saga*, which we eventually sold to EA. In the course of designing the game, I wanted to offer a 3D view into the Mars bases. A game called *Wizardry* by Sir-Tech was affectionately known by many as *D&D* on a computer. It did not have the licence, but it truly captured the spirit of *D&D*. I was hooked on the 3D maze crawling from that game and another game on the Macintosh called *Maze Wars*. I really wanted that to be in my Mars game."



» [Intellivision] *Advanced Dungeons & Dragons* for Intellivision was the first *D&D* game to appear on home systems way back in 1982.

Developing on the Commodore 64, Louis had to overcome the technical challenge presented by the machine's roughly 1.0 Mhz 6502 chip as it did not have the processing power to render 3D views. He found his solution in Karnaugh maps, a decades-old technique for expressing Boolean algebra in two-dimensional grids.

"I had the idea for my digital design courses to use Karnaugh maps to reduce the rendering of the 3D space into a forward renderer with minimal occlusion," explains Louis, "which allowed for the very fast rendering of a 3D maze in the character graphics space of the C64.

"I am pretty certain no one had done so before and I am 100% certain that it was used many times since. I had to introduce some inaccuracies in the character mapping and camera aperture to get things to line up correctly on character boundaries. These amounted to a unique digital signature, so for years I would see games where developers solved

» [PC] Less pure *D&D* due to its console RPG-like elements, *The Genie's Curse* ended up an entertaining, yet divisive game.

FIVE ESSENTIAL GAMES

Averaging almost a release per year since TSR started licensing D&D video games, here are the five must-plays...

CHAMPIONS OF KRYNN

■ 1990 ■ Various

While neither the first nor the most technically advanced of the Gold Box titles, *COK* took great strides to smooth out some of the earlier games' rough edges. As part of the *Dragonlance* series, *COK* introduced many gamers to the world of Krynn and kicked off a grand adventure where parties could be imported into *Death Knights* and all the way through to *Dark Queen*.

EYE OF THE BEHOLDER

■ 1990 ■ Various

Taking everything that *Dungeon Master* did right, improving the graphics, interface, adding true *D&D* mechanics, *EOB*'s mazes, puzzles and real-time combat pulled in an audience far beyond *D&D* aficionados. You can also watch a video of the completed but unreleased Atari Lynx version on YouTube. We'd argue that *Eye Of The Beholder 2* is the better game, but *EOB*'s impact is far more important.

DARK SUN: SHATTERED LANDS

■ 1993 ■ PC

Moving to a new engine and the savage, post-apocalyptic dark fantasy world of Athas, *Shattered Lands* was a great character-driven adventure with underrated turn-based *D&D* combat. It was rightly criticized for having an art style that didn't quite do its harsh setting justice, but gamers who get stuck in regardless, will find a deep and rewarding overlooked gem.

PLANESCAPE: TORMENT

■ 1999 ■ PC

Anything but a dungeon crawler, *Planescape: Torment* remains a prime example of how computer games can be a perfect storytelling medium. With its unparalleled cast of characters, dark themes and comprising of around 800,000 words of text, this is an expansive and superbly written instance of genuine role-playing. We'd recommend picking up the *Enhanced Edition*.

BALDUR'S GATE II

■ 2001 ■ PC

The pinnacle of the *Infinity Engine* titles and regarded by many as the greatest computer RPG ever made, *Baldur's Gate II* featured countless hours of adventuring, diverse paths for different classes, and an epic story in a fantasy world brimming with content both inside and outside the city of Amn. Now, two decades from its debut, this is the game today's RPGs still hope they are compared to.

» [PC] The recently released *Dungeons & Dragons: Chronicles Of Mystara* consists of Capcom's arcade games.

» [C64] *Curse Of The Azure Bonds* was an excellent sequel, adding more classes and higher character levels.

it in their own way and some that almost certainly reverse-engineered my solution."

Westwood Associates presented the work-in-progress 3D engine to Chuck Kroegel at SSI in an attempt to sell the idea of the Mars game. Chuck, however, saw the massive potential in Louis's work and instead wanted to use the demo to present to TSR the framework of what would become the now legendary *Gold Box* games.

"The problem was Chuck really wanted to show a finished engine working with a complete toolset," recalls Louis. "They didn't have the project yet so we did the work for a small percentage of the games as long as they used the tools and tech. I spent the better part of a month on 80-plus hour weeks devoted to the project to get a full dungeon character set, map and some rough monster sprites. I also built the early toolset that allowed for some rapid dungeon editing and monster tracking."

Louis's long hours and Chuck's presentation paid off handsomely. Outdoing the likes of EA and Mediagenic, who merely showed off slideshows of its top titles of the time, SSI pitched to TSR with working software showing how it would bring the licence to home computers, as well as a dedicated team who were not only already engaged in the project but also had a clear passion for *D&D* and won the coveted licence.

"In the end, the guys at SSI did all the heavy lifting," says Louis, "with a full presentation of their studio, commitment to the franchise and really smart design ideas on how to preserve the detail of *D&D* in a computer game. I'm very happy to be part of the solution that landed the deal. Chuck later said it was a transformative moment for SSI – they would become the *D&D* company."

SSI's first *Gold Box Dungeons and Dragons* game, *Pool Of Radiance*, was a runaway success and received praise from players and reviewers alike. "*Pool Of Radiance* is about to change the face of role-playing as we know it", wrote *Computer & Video*

> "CHUCK REALLY WANTED TO SHOW A FINISHED ENGINE WORKING WITH A COMPLETE TOOL SET"
>
> Louis Castle

POOL OF RADIANCE

How SSI made its seminal early D&D computer game

While *Pool Of Radiance* wasn't the first *D&D* game, it was the first to capture the *D&D* rules properly, paving the way for classics like *Baldur's Gate* and *Neverwinter Nights*, not to mention introducing gamers to the Forgotten Realms. "We learnt that a few weeks before we showed up, an EA representative had come to TSR [creator of *D&D*] and greatly swayed the management towards granting them the licence," director Chuck Kroegel explains. "When we visited, we brought about five people and four computers to show and demonstrate how we would approach the *D&D* licence. They chose SSI because of our obvious enthusiasm for *D&D*."

Firing up the game today, it's still amazing to see the kind of depth it retains, even after all these years. Character creation lets you to choose from six races and four classes, roll up their stats and then

prompts you to customise your appearance. Combat is a complex tactical experience, accurately reproducing the need to manage everything from the positioning of your party on the battle map, to the area of effect and chance to hit that your spells have. It's just as easy to wipe out your party with a poorly placed sleep spell as it is to utterly turn the tide of battle by hitting a swathe of enemy orcs.

"Lead designer Keith Brors had tons of experience playing *D&D* and many other role-playing games, and experience designing and developing computer role-playing games with detailed tactical combat engines," explains SSI founder and president Joel Billings. Creating a *D&D* adventure on late Eighties machines was no simple task. The hardware of the era would need to be squeezed for every drop of juice, and that's exactly what the team at SSI set about doing, going to extreme lengths to save space on the disk. They even hand-coded the entire thing in assembly language. "It was a challenge," explains Keith. "You literally had 32KB to work with. But a compiler would have made the code five or ten times larger than efficiently written assembly code would ever be."

The legacy of *Pool Of Radiance* lives on in the many great *D&D* games that followed. Without *Pool Of Radiance*, there would be no *Baldur's Gate*, *Icewind Dale*, or any of the modern isometric RPGs like *Pillars Of Eternity*. It truly was, and still is, a testament to what can be achieved with a little ingenuity and a lot of love for the hobby.

» [PLATO] The earliest known *D&D*-inspired computer game was *dnd*, seen here.

» [PC] *Dragons Of Flame* brought the *Heroes Of The Lance* gameplay out of Xak Tsaroth – unfortunately it wasn't good.

Games back in their October 1988 issue – how right it was.

Pool Of Radiance and its successor titles comprised a number of core gameplay elements that worked together beautifully. The main adventuring screen had a small window with the first-person view rendered in 3D, a list of the party's characters and their key info (such as hit points and condition) took up the upper-left portion of the screen, and a status window at the bottom displaying in-game messages, alerts and menu options. Encounters would switch the first-person window into a detailed image (sometimes with animation) showing off the NPC, monster or location before the entire UI switched to the combat interface.

Not just a favourite among fans, it was also a pivotal moment in gaming that would influence many future developers, among them is designer Chris Avellone, who has worked on some of the biggest RPGs of the last two decades, including numerous *D&D* titles.

"The first *D&D* game I played was *Pool Of Radiance*," he says, "and I had been dying to play it because it meant I could finally be a player and not a Dungeon Master. I remember being surprised by how true to the rules it was (which saved my ass considerably), and the way they structured Phlan so you felt like you were "taking back" the city piece by piece was great. I remember panicking the first time I encountered the Spectre in Mantor's Library, which was doubly frightening because of how close they had been following the rules up to that point… I had many reloads".

Now with a string of critically acclaimed games, and TSR more than happy with SSI's use of its brand, the development team decided to take *D&D* games where they'd never been before: onto the back of Krynn's dragons in what would go on to be one of the series' most divisive titles, *DragonStrike*. SSI released an innovative and truly novel 3D flight simulator that had players wielding a Dragonlance as they fought for territory in the skies above Krynn. This was a title that many gamers baulked at while others couldn't sink enough hours into, and its lead developer also fondly remembers it.

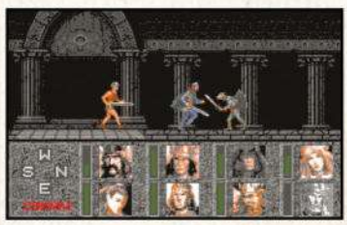
"If I can pick my own favourite *D&D* game, it would have to be *DragonStrike*," says Louis. "I really wanted to work on a flight simulator so Westwood pitched the idea to SSI to make a dragonflight sim. It was great fun to create the all-assembly true-3D fractal tech. I also did the design, story and some of the art. One of the most exciting parts of working on *DragonStrike* was that Westwood's story became part of the *Dragonlance* canon. Many of us were huge fans of the Margaret Weis and Tracy Hickman books so it was a great honour to thread our game into their world."

The *D&D* franchise also holds the honour of seeing the earliest graphical multiplayer online RPG, way back in 1991. The original *Neverwinter Nights*, also built around the *Gold Box* engine, was an American Online exclusive that was also the most popular game on the service. Peaking at 500 simultaneous players at the height of its success in the mid-Nineties, it was certainly one of the most popular among the early MMORPGs and paved the way for the likes of *Ultima Online*, *World Of Warcraft* and, of course, *D&D Online*.

SSI's success with the licence had laid the foundation of trust from

> "POOL OF RADIANCE IS ABOUT TO CHANGE THE FACE OF ROLE PLAYING AS WE KNOW IT"
>
> *Computer & Video Games*

» [Amiga] Due to its blend of RPG and flight-sim elements, *DragonStrike* is the ultimate love-it-or-hate-it *D&D* title.



» [Amiga] Side-scrolling *D&D* kicked off with *Heroes Of The Lance*, based on the first *Dragonlance* novel.

SELECTED TIMELINE

1974

1975

DUNGEONS & DRAGONS
■ TSR publish the original version of Gary Gygax and Dave Arneson's tabletop RPG.

DND
■ Just a year after its inception, *Dungeons and Dragons* sees the first videogame both based on and named after it.

1976

1977

1978

DUNGEON
■ Don Daglow released the first version of his *D&D*-inspired RPG. While earlier titles had only one playable character, Daglow implements full party control.

1979

DUNGEON MASTER'S GUIDE
■ The first *Dungeon Master's Guide* is published by TSR. Again authored by Gary Gygax, it contains everything need to run your own campaigns.

1980

1981

1982

AD&D: CLOUDY MOUNTAIN
■ Mattel, first to license the franchise, launches an *Advanced Dungeons And Dragons* videogame that has little in common beyond the title.

1983

WHAT MAKES A GREAT DUNGEONS & DRAGONS GAME?

TSR that would allow Westwood to develop *Eye Of The Beholder* in 1991 – not just one of the best *D&D* games of all time, it also showed that *D&D* rules could work in real time. While the likes of *Heroes Of The Lance* and *Dragons Of Flame* put popular characters, spells and other *D&D* elements into real-time action games, they were not really using the core *D&D* mechanics. *Eye Of The Beholder,* on the other hand, took first-person dungeon crawling to new heights – or lows, considering it took place in the depths beneath Waterdeep – with devious puzzles, a good range of Forgotten Realms enemies and NPCs, and all within a faithful interpretation of 2nd Edition *Advanced Dungeons & Dragons* rules.

By now gamers had seen the licence brought to computers and consoles in isometric RPGs, first-person RPGs, tactical combat sims, side-scroller action titles and of course, a dragonflight simulator – indeed, no genre was safe from the juggernaut of *D&D*. As could be expected, it also saw its share of strategy titles, in so doing giving a nod to the games that had inspired *D&D* videogames in the first place. SSI's *War Of The Lance* was an excellent title in the genre. Another popular strategy title was *Stronghold* from Stormfront Studios, an innovative title putting players in charge of an entire kingdom with *D&D*-classed heroes. Taking place in real time, though, not an RTS in the regular sense of the genre,

DUNGEONS
■ Not strictly always a dungeon per se – it could be a cursed tower, a forest maze or sewers beneath Waterdeep – but this is where it all happens.

CAMEOS
■ With so much lore to draw upon, many a *D&D* developer has enriched their story through a appearance of Khelben, Drizzt or the Heroes Of The Lance.

ENCHANTED WEAPONS
■ From simple +1 arrows through to the warhammer Crom Faeyr, *D&D* brings us that oh-so-moreish RPG loot.

MONSTERS
■ You'll encounter all sorts of creatures in a game of *D&D*, from displacer beasts, to orcs, goblins and beholders. Now where's our +1 sword?

MAGIC
■ Without it, it'd be a game of fighters and thieves rescuing princesses from other fighters and thieves. Clearly, it is fundamental to the nature of the franchise.

» [Mega CD] On top of its computer releases, *Eye Of The Beholder* saw ports on the SNES, GBA and Mega CD.

POOL OF RADIANCE
■ The first of the *Gold Box* series is launched to great commercial success, winning awards, new fans, and forging a long-lasting roleplaying legacy.

EYE OF THE BEHOLDER
■ Appealing to a wider audience than just hardcore *D&D*'ers, Westwood Associates' beautiful and brilliant first-person RPG takes home computers by storm.

TREASURES OF THE SAVAGE FRONTIER
■ The final *Gold Box* game ends on a high bringing graphical improvements and the earliest instance of NPC romances.

1984 1985 1986 1987 1988 1989 1990 1991 1992 1993

AD&D: 2ND EDITION
■ The entire *D&D* system receives a major overhaul. 2E brings big changes to the tabletop phenomenon, including efforts to clean up its public image.

NEVERWINTER NIGHTS
■ The first online *D&D* game and the first graphical MMORPG, this AOL favourite was a runaway success from Don Daglow's Stormfront Studios.

DARK SUN: SHATTERED LANDS
■ SSI's first non-*Gold Box D&D* game is released and it allowed gamers to encounter the *Dark Sun* campaign for the first time.

DID YOU KNOW?

1 In the Eighties, religious fundamentalists caused a moral panic around the world by connecting *D&D* to such ills as Satanism, sexual perversion and even cannibalism. The one that really took hold was an unsubstantiated link to teenage suicide, but thankfully public perception has long since moved on.

2 Don Daglow started with fan projects before producing some of the earliest official *D&D* computer games, later leading the development of such classics as *Gateway To The Savage Frontier*, *Neverwinter Nights* and *Stronghold*.

3 The early *Gold Box* titles had a string of tie-in novels that closely followed the plots of the games.

4 The same compression technology used by Westwood to fit *DragonStrike* on a single floppy disk was later implemented to get *Command & Conquer*'s full-screen video and audio to work on a single-speed CD ROM drive.

5 Many Westwood Associates employees lent their likeness to the character portraits you'll see in *Eye Of The Beholder*.

6 After taking controversial strides to implement same-sex marriage in *Fallout 2*, the same devs continued this progressive attitude in *Temple Of Elemental Evil*, where male characters could marry the pirate Bertram.

7 Fans love remaking the classics, and *Pool Of Radiance*, *Baldur's Gate* and *Icewind Dale* are now all playable as *Neverwinter Nights 2* mods.

8 Dave Gross, who joined the team at Overhaul Games to work on the new content in *Baldurs Gate: Enhanced Edition*, was one of nine *D&D* novel writers who Wizards Of The Coast collectively credited as TH Lain.

it was a deep and very popular strategy and resource management sim. Silicon Knights' *Fantasy Empires* combined traditional turn-based strategy with action sequences for combat, and Sierra's *Birthright: The Gorgon's Alliance* threw in real-time elements with adventures occurring in pseudo-3D. In an attempt not to be outdone by *Command & Conquer* and *Warcraft: Orcs & Humans*, *D&D* took a stab at the genre in 1996 with the release of *Blood & Magic*. It was a franchise-faithful RTS worth looking up if you're a fan of the genre with more than a passing interest in *D&D*. Be warned, though, it was a slow-moving game even back when it was launched, and it has sunk to a sluggish pace by today's standards. Similarly, 2005's *Dragonshard* was neither an amazing RTS nor an amazing *D&D* game, but thankfully had more than enough of each to be worth a look from fans (not to mention it is available today on GOG.com for a steal).

» [Amiga] Admit it – you also threw together a few unique-looking heroes in the character creation suite.

While *D&D* was still being put to solid use in videogames through the mid-Nineties, it had actually been a good few years since the last true RPG. In 1992, after the release of *Treasures Of The Savage Frontier*, the *Gold Box* engine was retired after its 13-game run. It would be seen again in *Spelljammer: Pirates Of Realmspace* and in the RPG development toolkit *Unlimited Adventures*, but its line had come to an end as SSI shifted to newer tech in the *Dark Sun* games.

» [Amiga] Hillsfar's jumble of action sequences and standard *Gold Box* fare made for a unique if not all too classic title.

WIZARDS OF THE COAST BUYS TSR

■ In a reported $25 million deal, *Magic: The Gathering* owners WOTC acquire the struggling original publisher of *Dungeons & Dragons*.

3RD EDITION

■ WOTC publish a new *Dungeon Master's Guide*, now in its third edition. 3E sees a major overhaul, increased complexity, rave reviews, and mixed reactions from long-time 2E fans.

NEVERWINTER NIGHTS

■ The first *D&D* title published by Atari, BioWare's hit includes the Aurora toolset which allows thousands of fans to build and share their own modules.

1994 | 1995 | 1996 | 1997 | 1998 | 1999 | 2000 | 2001 | 2002 | 2003

BALDUR'S GATE

■ Six years since the launch of the last great *Forgotten Realms* title, BioWare's epic wins numerous Game Of The Year Awards, sells in the millions, and reignites the genre.

POR: RUINS OF MYTH DRANNOR

■ A blight on the *Pool Of Radiance* name, Ubisoft forces the launch of a disappointing, bug-riddled game that even deleted some players' operating systems.

The new engine, first released in 1993, was, unfortunately, hosting some critical bugs and the graphics were not quite up to par with the rest of the industry – nor did they suit the Dark Sun campaign setting and sadly, they would prove nowhere near as popular as the Gold Box titles. A victim of unfortunate timing, SSI's hope for a new wave of RPGs that would see them succeed through the Nineties had come at a time when Nintendo and Sega dominated living rooms, while Sony's PlayStation was a year away from launch and games such as *Doom* all but ruled the PC. Another new addition to the *D&D* universe came in 1994's *Al-Qadim: The Genie's Curse*. While great on the story and *Arabian Nights*-themed adventure, it was light on core *D&D* and disappointed fans looking for another hardcore experience.

D&D did follow the industry by going fully-3D in the two *Ravenloft* titles of 1994 and 1995, but they weren't enough to pull computer RPGs out of the slump they saw in the Nineties. The *D&D* franchise did stay busy, though, offering the previously mentioned strategy titles, the disappointing late Nineties outings *DeathKeep* and *Iron And Blood*, and the rushed to market *Descent To Undermountain*. An honourable mention must be given to *Tower Of Doom* and *Shadow Over Mystara*, two excellent arcade games from Capcom that beautifully melded side-scrolling beat-'em-ups with core *D&D* gameplay.

This changed when November of 1998 saw the release of BioWare's *Baldur's Gate*, and *D&D* was well and truly back. Like the first *Gold Box* games, *Baldur's Gate* appropriated an engine intended for another title and more than exceeded the design.

"*Battleground Infinity* was going to be about Ragnarok, the Norse end of days," explains Trent Oster, cofounder of Beamdog, whose resume includes *Baldur's Gate*, *Neverwinter Nights* and the recent *Baldur's Gate Enhanced Editions*. "A rough demo was built showing off the big features. Our producer at Interplay on *Shattered Steel*, one Feargus Urquhart heard about the demo and asked to see it. He was the one who suggested the *D&D* licence and since everyone

NAME
AC
HP
BEYOND THIS GATE ARE THE MONSTER-RIDDEN AREAS OF THE OLD CITY. THEY ARE SLOWLY PREPARING FOR SETTLEMENT. THE COUNCIL OFFERS A GENEROUS REWARD TO THOSE WHO CLEAR AREAS OF MONSTERS.
PRESS <ENTER>/<RETURN> TO CONTINUE

» [PC] The original *Pool Of Radiance*, where players first experienced the *Gold Box* games back in 1998.

» [Amiga] *Shadow Sorcerer* was well-received thanks to its excellent real-time, isometric Dragonlance action.

DUNGEONS AND DRAGONS ONLINE

■ Turbine bring 3.5E into the subscription MMORPG market with a great *World Of Warcraft* alternative that has since gone Free To Play.

BALDUR'S GATE: ENHANCED EDITION

■ Beamdog releases an excellent remake of *Baldur's Gate*, fixing bugs, overhauling the UI, adding new NPCs, additional playable areas, and an arena-style game mode.

2004 2005 2006 2007 2008 2009 2010 2011 2012 2012 2022

DUNGEONS & DRAGONS TACTICS

■ Atari publish the only *D&D* game to appear on Sony's PlayStation Portable.

BALDUR'S GATE III

■ Larian took the reins of the *Baldur's Gate* series after their acclaimed *Divinity: Original Sin* duology. *Baldur's Gate III* is in early access until 2022, but it's already looking promising.

UNIVERSES EXPLORED: THE MANY WORLDS OF DUNGEONS & DRAGONS

There have been plenty of games based on the campaign settings of D&D…

AL QADIM

■ The Arabian Nights-themed *Al Qadim*, is based on the same world as the Forgotten Realms adventures. Home to only one computer game, it's a world with a lot of untapped potential.

SPELLJAMMER

■ Not strictly one world so much as an adventure in the space linking the major locations in the *D&D* universe, the setting of Spelljammer took *D&D* to space.

MYSTARA

■ A high-fantasy fan favourite since it came out in 1980, the world of Mystara has played home to three platform-exclusive video games as well as both Capcom's *D&D* coin-ops.

RAVENLOFT

■ Released in 1990, *D&D* had its own take on the suave blood enthusiasts. Despite its popularity, the Gothic horror world saw just three videogames. A pity as it's one of the best settings ever created.

BIRTHRIGHT

■ Centered on ruling nations, large-scale war and divine bloodlines, *Birthright* was a pre-*Game Of Thrones* of sorts that was heavier on political doings than it was on epic fantasy questing.

PLANESCAPE

■ Although Planescape links many other campaign settings together and brings a span of outlandish content to the *D&D* canon, is it unfortunately no longer officially supported.

DARK SUN

■ A barren post-apocalyptic wasteland featuring psionics as well as magic, *Dark Sun's* bleak desert world presents a campaign setting which screams out for a modern release.

HOLLOW WORLD

■ Released in 1990, this setting based beneath the surface of Mystara saw only one videogame release: the Mega Drive-exclusive *Warriors Of The Eternal Sun*.

DRAGONLANCE

■ Popularised by Margeret Weis and Tracy Hickman's *Chronicles* novels, Dragonlance is a fantasy universe with a developed history and a cast of memorable characters.

GREYHAWK

■ The original fantasy *D&D* campaign from Gary Gygax. It was developed and supported for over 25 years and is still now one of role-playing's most richly detailed worlds.

EBERRON

■ 2004's Eberron is one of *D&D*'s most recent campaign settings. While it may never match the Forgotten Realms, expect more titles set in this world of fantasy with a garnish of steampunk.

FORGOTTEN REALMS

■ The most widely known *D&D* setting, The Realms are home to legendary locations such as Baldur's Gate, Waterdeep, Neverwinter, Amn, and Icewind Dale.

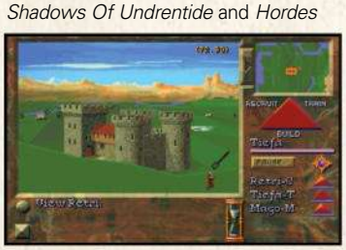
» [PC] *Dragonshard* was a prime example of forcing a franchise into a genre that didn't quite suit it.

> "EVEN WITHIN THE ISOMETRIC VIEW ALONE, THERE ARE ALMOST ENDLESS WAYS TO INNOVATE"
>
> Trent Oster

at BioWare was a total *D&D* fanboy at the time, the team jumped on the chance."

Thus an RTS to be known as *Battleground Infinity* fell by the wayside to provide the DNA for what would become the *Infinity Engine*, powering *Baldur's Gate* and its amazing sequel, as well as *Planescape: Torment* and both *Icewind Dale* games. It had been years since the franchise's last massive role-playing game appeared, but what a return it was. The Infinity Engine games sold millions of copies, garnered an outstanding number of awards and like the *Gold Box* games before them, made *D&D* accessible to a new generation of fans. Its time was far from over and it continues to forge its legacy thanks to the ongoing work on the *Enhanced Edition* remakes.

BioWare would continue to be the number-one name in *D&D* gaming at the turn of the millennium, releasing *Neverwinter Nights* in 2002. Where *Neverwinter Nights* excelled was in its Aurora Toolkit, which made it easy for would-be DMs and game designers to build their own *D&D* modules. It may have had an admittedly lacklustre official campaign, but its expansions *Shadows Of Undrentide* and *Hordes Of The Underdark* were massive steps up, and also brought improvements to Aurora. Another landmark *D&D* title both for gamers and modders, it also allowed persistent online instances of certain modules and saw BioWare win even more RPG of the year awards.



» [PC] Billed as a 'kingdom simulator', *Stronghold* was hit from *D&D* computer gaming legend Don Daglow.

During the time *Neverwinter Nights* was peaking, Black Isle Studios would suffer a fatal blow when it was closed by Interplay. Obsidian Entertainment soon formed as the successor studio, keeping many of the same staff. No strangers to *D&D*, Obsidian would carry the torch with the improved *Neverwinter Nights 2*, the *Electron Engine* would likewise expand the quality of modder offerings. There are now hundreds of high-quality adventures waiting to be downloaded, including extensive remakes of some of the most popular *D&D* games.

It's now been more than 15 years since *Neverwinter Nights 2* launched, and other than its expansions and the *Enhanced Edition* remakes from Beamdog, fans did not see a core *D&D* game for some time. Some may go so far as to wonder where *D&D* computer games can innovate from here. There is such an extensive back-catalogue with games in almost every genre covering the most popular campaign settings. With no end in sight for the brand, is it onwards and upwards for new games as new *D&D* editions come out, or has 40 years of *D&D* computer gaming already stretched the offerings to the point where we'll see nothing new come out of the franchise?

Trent feels that *D&D* and the computer gaming genre it paved the way for is far from done. "I think there is a ton of room left for innovation," he says. "I think even within the isometric view alone there are almost endless ways to innovate. Videogames have always been constrained by the capabilities of the computers or consoles which operated them. More recently, however, the variety of gaming has been constrained by the creative risks that larger publishers were willing to take, which lead to innovation mainly on the visuals.

"We have now entered a golden era, where independent developers can undertake whatever risks they are willing to invest in," he explains to us, "and as one of those developers, I have to say that the future for RPG innovation looks very bright."

» [PC] Marred by a buggy release, *The Temple Of Elemental Evil* has now been fan-patched to its potential.

TRENT OSTER

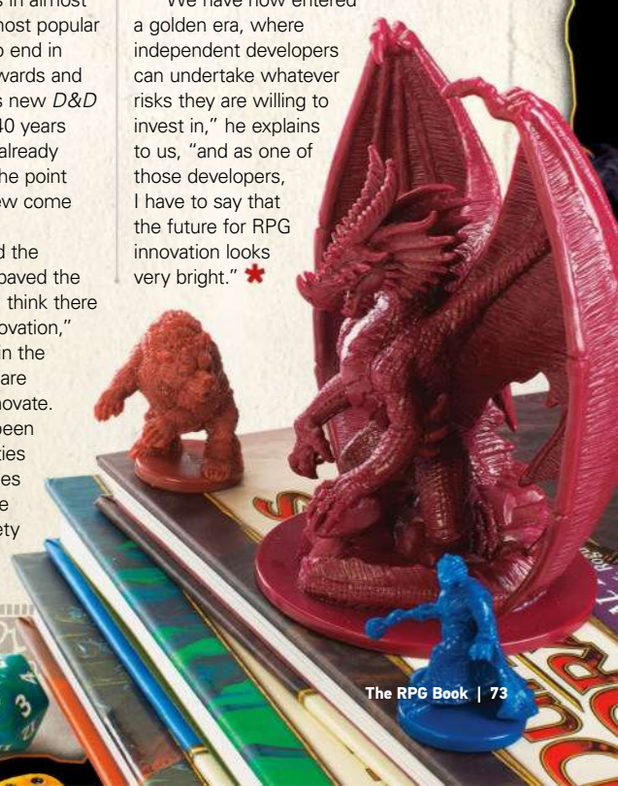
A one-on-one with the cofounder of Beamdog

Why do you think *Dungeons & Dragons* computer games have been so successful?
I think there is a fundamental connection between videogames and *D&D*. Some of the first attempts at making videogames in the dawn of computing science were *D&D* styled games. I think *D&D* is just such a fundamentally great experience that making a version of the game you could play more frequently than pen and paper is just logical. I think the fantasy genre is a great setting and *D&D* is just such a solid implementation of a rules system to allow you to adventure in that setting. It just works.

How much of a challenge was it for you to secure the rights to create the Infinity Engine *Enhanced Editions*?
I spent an entire year negotiating. Even with the original deal we've still had ongoing challenges as well. In short, we went through a great deal of effort to obtain the rights for these games and we are putting in a great deal of effort to make them the best they can be. We believe the *Baldur's Gate* games and *Icewind Dale* are some of the best *D&D* role-playing on any computer platform and we're very committed to bringing them to the fans, old and new.

Congratulations on releasing *Icewind Dale:EE*! We all want to know... *IWD2* and *Planescape Torment* – are these going to happen any time soon?
Thanks! It was hard work by some really awesome people. As for the future, we're going to wait for a bit and fix up *Baldur's Gate II*. We shipped *BGII:EE* a little early and a number of bugs leaked out. We are committed to spending time to make it right and ensure everyone can have access to a great *BGII* experience. After that, we'll have to play it by ear and see.

Beamdog has since released an *Enhanced Edition* of *Planescape: Torment* and *Neverwinter Nights*



RPG HISTORY

1990s

New technologies heralded an era of cinematic ambition and blockbuster sales – though not everybody shared the glory

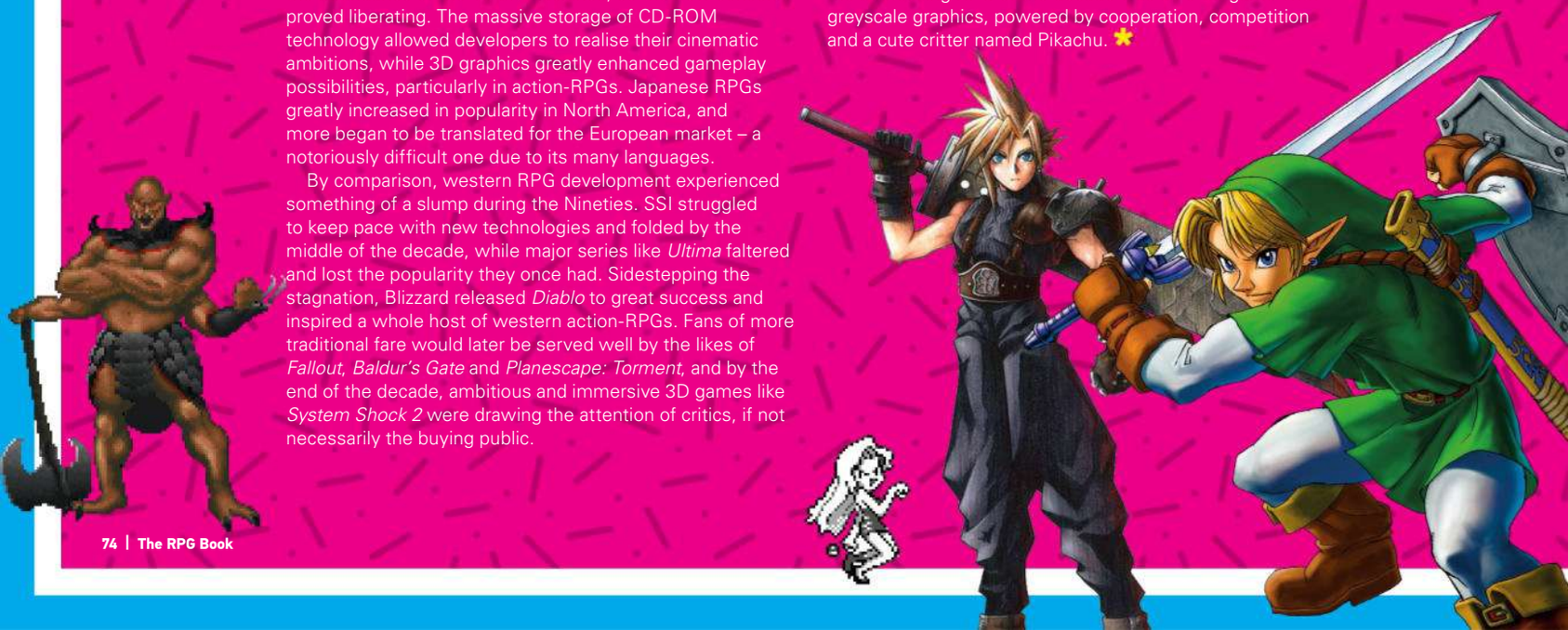
Words by Nick Thorpe

Few decades can match the Nineties when it comes to technological advances, and there was no question that role-playing games saw the benefit of the jump in performance. However, long-term fans of the genre may have been surprised by some of the developments over the course of the decade.

Japanese developers were becoming increasingly proficient at creating RPGs for the home console market. By the middle of the decade, they were frequently pushing the boundaries of the 16-bit machines, so the new consoles proved liberating. The massive storage of CD-ROM technology allowed developers to realise their cinematic ambitions, while 3D graphics greatly enhanced gameplay possibilities, particularly in action-RPGs. Japanese RPGs greatly increased in popularity in North America, and more began to be translated for the European market – a notoriously difficult one due to its many languages.

By comparison, western RPG development experienced something of a slump during the Nineties. SSI struggled to keep pace with new technologies and folded by the middle of the decade, while major series like *Ultima* faltered and lost the popularity they once had. Sidestepping the stagnation, Blizzard released *Diablo* to great success and inspired a whole host of western action-RPGs. Fans of more traditional fare would later be served well by the likes of *Fallout*, *Baldur's Gate* and *Planescape: Torment*, and by the end of the decade, ambitious and immersive 3D games like *System Shock 2* were drawing the attention of critics, if not necessarily the buying public.

This was also the decade when RPGs started to regain the social aspect of their tabletop progenitors. With home internet access becoming more common, developers sought to take advantage with games like *Meridian 59* and *Ultima* Online, with Richard Garriott coining the modern MMORPG (massively multiplayer online role-playing game) genre name. If you fancied making some digital friends instead, games like *Star Ocean* and *Sakura Wars* incorporated social mechanics that could affect your party members and story outcomes. But for all the technical advances of the Nineties, the bestselling RPG of the decade was an 8-bit game with greyscale graphics, powered by cooperation, competition and a cute critter named Pikachu.



GAMES THAT DEFINED THE DECADE

1990
Fire Emblem

Tactical role-playing games became a popular subgenre during the Nineties, and this Famicom game from Intelligent Systems really codified that formula. Though its sequels and plenty of the games it influenced became internationally popular, the original *Fire Emblem: Shadow Dragon And The Blade Of Light* was exclusive to Japan until an English version was released on Nintendo Switch in 2020.

1993
Betrayal At Krondor

Dynamix's adaptation of Raymond Feist's *Riftwar* novels was a rare highlight from the early Nineties computer RPG scene. The digitised character sprites and 3D exploration were nice, but after a slow start to sales, it was the tactical combat and considered approach to puzzle design that eventually won players over. The events depicted in the game were turned into a novel by Raymond himself five years later in 1998.

1995
Chrono Trigger

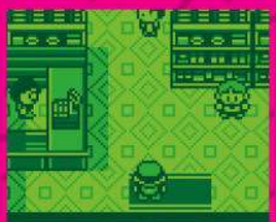
Despite some great games appearing on rival machines, the SNES boasted the best JRPG selection for much of the Nineties, and *Chrono Trigger* was arguably the best of the lot. Uniting talent from Hironobu Sakaguchi (*Final Fantasy*) Yuji Horii (*Dragon Quest*) and art from Akira Toriyama (*Dragon Ball*), the adventure was captivating thanks to strong storytelling, multiple endings and the presentation was top-notch.

1996
Diablo

Though action-RPGs had been popular on Japanese computer formats, they didn't take hold in the same way in the west until Blizzard hit gold with *Diablo*. RPG traditionalists found it perhaps a little too streamlined, but dungeon-crawling fanatics had a whale of a time with its fast action and networked play. Hacking, slashing and looting hadn't been portrayed as so fun, and the sequel would only improve things.

1996
The Elder Scrolls II: Daggerfall

The second game in Bethesda's hit series was the closest thing players had experienced to a true virtual world in the mid-Nineties. The massive world offered you the ability to go where you wanted and do what you pleased, with no mandatory quests and a variety of possible endings. The series would evolve even more over its lifespan, but you could argue the ambition was born here.



1996
Pokémon Red & Blue

Find and capture 151 different creatures to become a Pokémon master. It sounds so simple, but the genius of Game Freak's hit RPG was that it couldn't be done alone – some Pokémon were version exclusives, and others wouldn't evolve until they'd been traded away with a friend. The ability to battle fellow Trainers with the Game Boy Link Cable was just icing on the cake.

1997
Fallout

Wasteland was a favourite of many Eighties RPG fans, and Interplay created *Fallout* as a spiritual sequel to that classic. The game's post-apocalyptic setting provided not only the basis for a great plot but a welcome alternative to standard swords-and-sorcery fare, and the robust character creation was well-balanced. Later, the series would be developed by Bethesda and resemble its *Elder Scrolls* titles.

1997
Final Fantasy VII

Squaresoft's PlayStation masterpiece was enormously expensive to make, but you could see why – its cinematic ambitions were unmatched by any other game at the time. Beautiful prerendered 3D backgrounds, spectacular real-time 3D battle animations and astonishing full-motion video cutscenes all served to enhance a compelling sci-fi tale of a planet ravaged by humanity.

1998
The Legend Of Zelda: Ocarina Of Time

Nintendo was particularly adept at adapting its game concepts to 3D environments, and this classic Nintendo 64 adventure did that for its action-RPG series. The new graphical technology made for memorable worlds and bosses, while the lock-on combat system was a pivotal innovation for the genre that was widely borrowed by other developers.

1999
Everquest

Though it wasn't the first MMORPG to grace computers, *Everquest* usurped all of its predecessors to become the most popular game of its kind. Its 3D graphics and the ability to opt out of combat with other players made it appealing to genre newcomers, and it's still going today. We wouldn't have the likes of *World Of Warcraft* or *Final Fantasy XIV* if *Everquest* didn't set the MMO standard.

RPG Heaven

The Greatest SNES RPGS of all time

The Super Nintendo has a bit of a well-deserved reputation for being THE machine for RPG experiences. Join us as we showcase the epic adventures that made Mega Drive owners jealous

Words by Martin Hinson

Terranigma

PUBLISHER: ENIX (JP) NINTENDO (PAL) **DEVELOPER:** QUINTET **YEAR** 1995

Terranigma is something of an oddity in the Super Nintendo RPG library. It was first released in 1995 in Japan under the title *Tenchi Sozo*, which translates as 'The Creation Of Heaven And Earth'. A year later it was localised by Nintendo for the PAL markets but somehow never saw a release in America. This was extremely rare as most SNES RPGs made the trip to the US first and only a handful ever made it to PAL territories, a fact that explains why *Terranigma* now commands very high prices today.

Terranigma is an action RPG that tells the story of Ark and his quest to resurrect life on Earth. It uses a top-down view and a fairly simple, but quite deep, real-time combat system. Ark has plenty of abilities such as dashing, jumping, sliding, guarding and an unusual magic system. For example, you must find Magirocks, which are taken to the magic shop to be turned into consumable spells. Once used, the spells turn back into Magirock and can be taken to the shop again. The game moves at quite a pace, even for an action-based RPG. Ark is instantly controllable and responds to commands on a whim, making him a joy to control.

The meat of *Terranigma* involves the resurrection of Earth. Once you complete the first five towers at the start of the game, the continents of the world are restored and Ark travels to the mainland in order to kickstart life. Your first task is to revive the plant life to enable nature to begin its journey. Ark can converse with the plants and they will guide you to revive the animals and then eventually mankind. This is predominantly achieved by travelling to various parts of the world to complete dungeons, gain items and trigger the multitude of story events.

The reason *Terranigma* is so good, though, is down to expert execution of various elements by developers, Quintet. It manages to tell a wonderfully moving story and mix in plenty of original elements within the genre. For example, once you revive mankind, you are tasked with building the economies of the continents by helping residents make discoveries and then introducing them to different cultures.

The plot is quite unique because you play a large portion of the game with no real enemy. Normally in RPGs there is a defining evil from the very beginning of the game, but not so with *Terranigma*, which unravels with a level of skill not seen in many console games of the time. It's filled with deception, regret, love, religion and science and told with excellent pacing.

Terranigma also features superb graphics that vary from dank, desolate landscapes to vibrant jungles. The animation is excellent, character designs are attractive and the boss fights are impressive. The music is also superb, one of the best soundtracks of the 16-bit generation for sure.

We're praying the game gets an official release today so it can be enjoyed by those who missed it the first time around. This is probably the one of the most anticipated classic SNES RPGs to see some reissue love. *Terranigma* is an all-time classic that despite commanding high prices is worth a place in any SNES owner's collection.

Soul Blazer

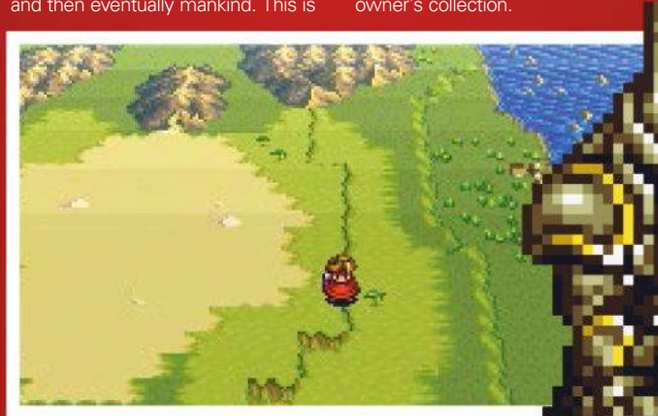
PUBLISHER: ENIX **DEVELOPER:** QUINTET **YEAR:** 1992

Seen as the first part of an unofficial trilogy that features both *Illusion Of Time* and *Terranigma*, *Soul Blazer* is an action RPG based around the theme of resurrection. Essentially a dungeon-crawler, the player is tasked with freeing the souls of lost humans which, once released, rebuild the towns around them on your way to defeating the evil Deathtoll. The game tells a simple but poignant story that certainly has the power to draw the player in. Combat is also rather simple but somehow it all works like a dream because it's fast-paced, with plenty of enemies and some excellent boss battles. A forgotten gem that rewards curious RPG hunters.

Mystic Quest Legend

PUBLISHER: SQUARE (US/JP) NINTENDO (PAL) **DEVELOPER:** SQUARE **YEAR:** 1992

Developed by Square and aimed as an entry-level RPG, *Mystic Quest Legend* was notable for being the first *Final Fantasy*-themed game released in the PAL regions, although it was a spin-off rather than part of the main series. Despite being dramatically cut down, *Mystic Quest Legend* is absorbing and enjoyable mainly thanks to its fun battle system and some fantastic music. There are no random battles here, as enemies are on-screen and a battle starts when you touch them. The game is also littered with optional battle arenas for levelling. With plenty of items, weapons and enemies, it's a simple but enjoyable experience.



Breath of Fire II

PUBLISHER: CAPCOM (NA/JP) LAGUNA (EU) **DEVELOPER:** IN-HOUSE **YEAR:** 1994

Superior in almost every way to its predecessor, Capcom's *Breath of Fire II* is another high-quality RPG for the Super Nintendo. The majority of the game is viewed from a traditional top-down perspective, but battles are viewed from a visually superb isometric viewpoint that features fantastic sprites and glorious special effects. Combat is turn-based and does feature random battles, but the pace of battles remains fast enough to avoid frustration. Centring on now series-staple characters Ryu and Nina, Ryu has the ability to transform into a dragon, which is one of the most interesting parts of the game. The recurring characters, much like *The Legend of Zelda*'s, are descendants of previous characters and not the same ones. Despite a sluggish start and occasionally iffy translation, *Breath of Fire II* picks up pace to evolve into a truly great RPG.

Front Mission

PUBLISHER: SQUARE **DEVELOPER:** G-CRAFT **YEAR:** 1995

Released only in Japan in 1995, *Front Mission* still managed to gain a cult following in the West and was finally released in an officially translated form in North America during 2007 on Nintendo's DS. The game is an RPG of a tactical nature with linear game progression and a deep, entertaining plot. Set in 2090 and revolving around the colonisation of a fictitious island in the Pacific Ocean, *Front Mission* tells a tale that's as intriguing as it is fresh. The battle system is mostly in the usual tactical mould, however when attacks are performed, the game cuts to a close-up of the target in question for some spectacular visual effects. Depth comes from the customisation on offer. The majority of units are Wanzers, giant walking tanks that have four unique health bars: one each for the legs, left arm, right arm and body. Each is upgradable as the game progresses. It's different and highly recommended.

Illusion of Time

PUBLISHER: ENIX (JP) NINTENDO (WORLD) **DEVELOPER:** QUINTET **YEAR** 1993

Despite being another action RPG, *Illusion Of Time* is quite a different beast to many similar games. Eschewing many staples of the genre, such as experience points, currency or equipment, *Illusion Of Time* centres around Will and his alter egos in a plot to uncover the secrets of the Tower Of Babel. Like *Terranigma,* the world is based loosely on Earth and features many locations such as The Great Wall Of China and the Egyptian Pyramids. After adventuring to the Tower Of Babel with his father, disaster strikes and Will returns to the village alone with no recollections of what happened. The game begins in earnest when Will gains the ability to make his first of two transformations. Our hero does have the ability to increase his power by collecting jewels dropped when clearing a room of enemies, but this unique skill can only be done once per room. It all makes for a highly novel adventure.

Ogre Battle

PUBLISHER: ENIX **DEVELOPER:** QUEST **YEAR:** 1995

One of the most important things about *Ogre Battle* is that it launched one of the most successful careers in Japan, namely Yasumi Matsuno, who went on to create several mega hits, two of which scored 40/40 in *Famitsu*. The other most important thing is that it's also an excellent strategy RPG, although it plays out more like an RTS title, such as *Command & Conquer*, upon entering battle. *Ogre Battle* has plenty of depth when preparing for combat. It features a tarot card system that can be used to add certain effects at certain times. There's an alignment system that's a play on the good/evil theme, a day/night cycle that affects how certain classes or cards react in fights and more than 70 different classes of units to control. Set to a gripping, politically motivated plot and boasting some lovely visuals, *Ogre Battle* comes highly recommended to those that like a good challenge.

Secret of Evermore

PUBLISHER: SQUARE **DEVELOPER** IN-HOUSE **YEAR:** 1995

In 1995, Super Nintendo fans were feverishly anticipating *Secret of Mana 2*. Instead they got *Secret Of Evermore*, a game developed by a team in America that Square had set up solely for creating it.

After the initial disappointment that *Mana 2* was not coming, *Secret Of Evermore* turned out to be an excellent take on the *Mana* gameplay system, but with a contemporary setting in America. The plot is based around time travel and involves an unnamed boy and his dog while featuring plenty of clever B-movie references. What we love about *Secret Of Evermore* is that it is packed with interesting ideas. Each region has a different currency, which can be converted at certain vendors and as you travel to each time zone, your dog takes on a different form relevant to that zone. Magic is based around alchemy, so you have to create your spells before you can cast them. The dog can also be used to sniff out ingredients for you, delivering another nice touch in a game that's littered with them.

Chrono Trigger

PUBLISHER: SQUARESOFT **DEVELOPER:** IN-HOUSE **YEAR:** 1995

This epic RPG was developed by Squaresoft and featured a creative team that had fans of the genre salivating. Hironobu Sakaguchi, the creator of *Final Fantasy*; Yuji Horii, creator of long-term rival Enix's *Dragon Quest*; and Akira Toriyama, artist of *Dragon Ball Z* and *Dragon Quest*, were all lead designers on the project. This led to *Chrono Trigger* being massively anticipated by Japanese and Western RPG fans alike. We're pleased to say this masterpiece delivered on all counts.

The first thing you notice about the game is the very *Dragon Ball*-style art. It's striking compared to the sombre stylings of *Final Fantasy VI*. Characters have wild spiky hair, colours are vivid but retain a realistic style that sits somewhere between other popular Squaresoft games.

On the surface, *Chrono Trigger* seems like any other Japanese RPG, however it contains several important innovations that set it apart from them. The first of these is the complete elimination of random battles and the separate battle screen. Enemies are visible at all times, so once you come into contact with one the battle begins and plays out from the same viewpoint, rather than cutting to a battle map. This helps to not only avoid the frustration of random encounters, but also allows the level of immersion into the world to remain high without the jarring change of scenery.

The next major innovation is its many multiple endings. *Chrono Trigger* features no fewer than 14 different endings to discover, many of them accessible through the excellent new Game Plus feature that's now standard on many of today's games.

Throughout the game, lead character Crono travels across various time zones ranging from 65000000BC to 2300AD. This gave the developers a real freedom to create very diverse and interesting locations, ranging from the dinosaur-infested forests of the past to the malfunctioning domes of the future. The story itself is excellent with intriguing enemies, genuine heartfelt moments and a great translation that still stands up today.

Chrono Trigger is a masterpiece of game design and it hasn't aged at all since it was first released in 1995. Anyone with even a passing interest in the genre should check it out immediately. Just be aware the SNES version is a little pricey.

Super Mario RPG

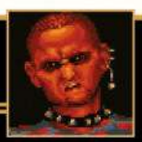
PUBLISHER: NINTENDO **DEVELOPER:** SQUARESOFT **YEAR:** 1996 (NTSC)

Super Mario RPG is a landmark title in many different ways. On the one hand, it was a stunning collaboration between Nintendo and Square, but on the other, it was one of the last Square-developed titles on a Nintendo platform for some time.

The first thing new players should do when starting the game is to watch the brilliant Attract mode. This gives players a great idea of the sheer amount of superb ideas that have been crammed into it. Featuring a mix of action platforming and turn-based combat, *Super Mario RPG* is a fast-paced, absorbing adventure, which is incredibly accessible to even the most novice of RPG fans. Visually the game looks 32-bit, as it features similar rendering techniques to *Donkey Kong Country* and a distinctive 3D isometric viewpoint. The music is suitably twee but never annoying as expected from now industry legend, Yoko Shimomura.

If there is one thing that *Super Mario RPG* does so well, it's that it highlights Squaresoft in its prime and how big a deal it was when Nintendo finally lost the talented developer to Sony for *Final Fantasy VII*.

Shadowrun



PUBLISHER: DATA EAST/LASER BEAM **DEVELOPER:** BEAM SOFTWARE **YEAR:** 1993

One of the most unique titles on the SNES, *Shadowrun* combines action RPG-style gameplay with elements of the point-and-click genre that was popular on computers at the time. Set in the not-too-distant future, your task as Jake Armitage is to track down your missing identity and to find the person that wants you dead. The cyberpunk setting feels very fresh on the console, the isometric visual style is nicely detailed, while the music is suitably matched and well composed. Piecing together the plot is a hugely compelling experience, while talking to NPCs opens up new conversational opportunities to help you through this more adult of Super Nintendo RPGs.

Secret of Mana

PUBLISHER: SQUARESOFT **DEVELOPER:** IN-HOUSE **YEAR:** 1993

Secret Of Mana is a hugely popular action RPG and for good reason. Squaresoft's game features sumptuous graphics, incredible music and a stunning three-player mode that instantly made it stand apart from other RPGs of the time.

First released in 1993 and a follow-up to the Game Boy classic *Mystic Quest*, *Secret Of Mana* captivated audiences from the get go. It tells a simple story of a young boy who discovers a mysterious sword that he pulls, Arthur-like, from solid stone. It turns out that Mana, the lifeblood of the land, is being drained by the enemy in order to control the world; leaving the hero to energise the failing Mana Sword and hopefully restore balance to the land.

Visually, *Secret Of Mana* is stunning, with some of the best visuals to be seen on a 16-bit system at the time. Locations are diverse, ranging from desert plateaus, bustling villages and evergreen forests, with Upperland being a standout location, as you literally walk through the forest as the seasons change from one to the next. Sonically the game doesn't disappoint either. The music in the opening sequence is still one of the most stunning in gaming, even today. Using sampled pipes, bass and various synthesised sounds among others, *Secret Of Mana*'s soundtrack is diverse, often beautiful, yet dark and dramatic when it needs to be.

At its core, it's an action-focused role-playing game featuring character levels, weapon levels and magic levels. Eight weapons are available to the player, which can be upgraded throughout the adventure. Magic, too, comes in eight forms and covers a variety of traditional elements. The biggest aspect of the game, however, is that it can be played by up to three players using a SNES multi-tap. This is something that has rarely been done since, which is disappointing, as it completely takes a usually solitary experience and livens it up immensely. On the downside, when in single-player the AI can cause a few minor issues, although its behaviour can be adjusted. Ultimately though, *Secret of Mana* is another classic RPG for Nintendo's 16-bit console.

Earthbound

PUBLISHER: NINTENDO **DEVELOPER:** HAL/APE **RELEASE:** 1994

Earthbound is certainly one of the most interesting titles for the Super Nintendo. On the surface, it appears to be fairly simplistic, but the more time spent with it, the more you realise just how unique it actually is. In fact, there's nothing else quite like it on any 16-bit console.

Set in modern-day America, *Earthbound* is a Japanese take on the American lifestyle with often-hilarious results. It tells the story of Ness and his friends and their adventure to defeat the evil Giygas, the leader of an alien invasion on planet Earth.

The graphics have a simple but extremely charming style to them, coming across like a cute Saturday morning cartoon. The world itself is presented in a pseudo-3D style and is completely seamless from one location to the next which is very uncommon within the actual genre. The fighting system is generally standard, but the actions of characters during fights will leave players grinning from ear to ear, as they're so entertaining. Despite a fairly slow pace, *Earthbound* is an incredibly charming and wacky game that deserves to be played through. It was made available on the Wii U Virtual Console and SNES Mini, but we'd say it's due a Nintendo Switch reissue.

Final Fantasy VI

PUBLISHER: SQUARESOFT **DEVELOPER:** IN-HOUSE **RELEASE:** 1994

Leading up to the release of *Final Fantasy VI*, Squaresoft was building a massive reputation in the RPG scene. Enix, developer of *Dragon Quest*, was the most popular in Japan at the time, but *Final Fantasy VI* certainly marked a shift in Square's favour. It was simply an astonishing package, which was wonderfully ambitious with its storytelling and dark themes. Couple this with glorious visuals and a critically acclaimed soundtrack and it's no wonder *Final Fantasy VI* is often heralded as the best game in the series by American and Japanese audiences.

The plot is quite dark and at times even depressing, as you work your way through the many areas of the game, meeting hundreds of interesting characters along the way. The central character of the story is a young girl called Terra. When you first meet her she has been brainwashed by the evil empire and is being controlled in order to attack Espers (magical beings) and wipe them out. Once free of the empire, Terra goes on a journey of discovery to find out where she is from and rediscover her forgotten memories. Along the way some absolutely magnificent characters are met: Shadow the ninja with his trusty canine sidekick Interceptor; Edgar, the King Of Figaro, who has an eye for the ladies; Ultros who is apparently octopus royalty; and Kefka, the antagonist of the game and none other than a court jester! Kefka aims to defeat the Espers to take control of the magic and indeed the world. It's the duty of the player to stop him. Along the way, themes of love, regret, isolation, desperation and many others are carefully explored. Squaresoft did an excellent job with such a deep plot and it still impresses today.

Plot aside, *Final Fantasy VI* plays out much like traditional Japanese RPG with active turn-based combat and plenty of random battles. With 14 playable characters and masses of customisation, it's an all-time classic that continues to age well.

Seiken Densetsu 3

PUBLISHER: SQUARESOFT **DEVELOPER:** IN-HOUSE **YEAR:** 1995

Despite never being released outside of Japan, *Seiken Densetsu 3* has built up a huge following over the years, with many fans that are still desperate for an official translation. There are many reasons for this, but the most obvious are its graphics, which are achingly beautiful and easily sit alongside some of the best 32-bit 2D RPGs.

Like its predecessor, *Secret Of Mana*, *Seiken Densetsu 3* is an action RPG with deep combat and a multiplayer option, although it only supports two players. It's packed with many unique features, however, including a branching story arc, absolutely huge bosses and a day-and-night cycle with each day based on an element that affects magic as a result. *Seiken Densetsu 3* never made it to the west because of a few technical problems in the game's code, but it has been translated by fans and is fully playable in English, although sourcing a Japanese copy is still worth doing.

SO YOU WANT TO COLLECT...

MEGA DRIVE RPGs

Although often overshadowed by the Super Nintendo's legendary RPG catalogue, Sega's Mega Drive still has plenty to offer (more so if you can understand Japanese). The following 20 gems are worthy of both your time and your collection

Words by Kerry Brunskill

PHINAL PHANTASY

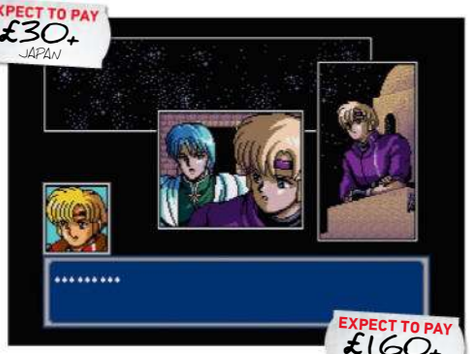
PHANTASY STAR IV

DEVELOPER: SEGA
RELEASE: 1993

■ Between its enduring quality, initial low print numbers and high RRP, the current three-figure resale prices for English copies of Sega's series-ender shouldn't come as much of a surprise. Luckily, there's a slight silver lining in knowing there have been several physical and digital re-releases over the years either in dedicated Japanese *Phantasy Star* collections or as part of various Mega Drive bundles, as well as an individual Steam release available for under a pound. iOS and Android devices can even download the game for free (ad supported – a small fee will permanently remove these ads) if you'd like to spend some time with the game before handing over money for a cartridge.

Japanese copies of the game are not only adorned with beautiful artwork but also come with a colour fold-out sheet showing an annotated map of Motavia on one side and a list of magical techniques and special skills on the other (in Japanese). This useful item is included as standard, so a second-hand copy is incomplete if this is missing from yours.

» [Mega Drive] As with many RPGs featured here, the Japanese version is cheaper but has a language barrier to consider.



» [Mega Drive] Beautiful images like this really help to heighten an already emotional scene.

SCI-FANTASY

How Sega's epic blends genres

Phantasy Star IV does a lot of things right, but perhaps the one that tends to go unnoticed most often is how seamlessly it blends hard sci-fi concepts with traditional RPG fantasy. Evil towers rising from the sand, hidden crystalline planets hosting a guiding voice left by godlike beings, and even actual space wizards effortlessly rub shoulders with hidden laboratories growing biological monsters, sentient computers who consider artificially-created 'Numen' their children, and multiple spaceships lying dormant in underground hangars. Your core party has just as many hooded spell-slinging wizards in it as it does gun-toting androids, and along the way, they'll be joined by everyone from human academics to alien priests with a penchant for terrible puns. To date there's still nothing quite like it other than its own neon-soaked online successors, and even those don't meld these contrasting concepts with quite the same conviction as this old single-player swansong.

SUPER SPELL-CIAL

SURGING AURA

EXPECT TO PAY £140+ JAPAN

DEVELOPER: JAPAN MEDIA PROGRAMMING
RELEASE: 1995

■ As a later Japan-exclusive Mega Drive release and part of Sega's 'Mega Role Play Project' series, this has always leaned towards being more expensive than most, however, in recent years, asking prices have more than doubled, even though copies are no more rare than they were before. As unpleasant a thought as it is, there's a real chance if this trend continues, today's 'ridiculous' resale prices will be considered a bargain in five years time. So it may be worth biting the bullet now rather than waiting for a drop that, so far, has never come. To be considered complete, the box must include a pin badge of Muu standing behind the game's title – do be aware that any yellowing on the clear coating of this will be down to age rather than mistreatment by a previous owner.

» [Mega Drive] Battles play out in real time, spells are chanted to completion.

» [Mega Drive] Full-screen pixel art really hammers home the game's dramatic and destructive opening.

LOTTERY WINNERS ONLY

SOLIEL

EXPECT TO PAY £70+ JAPAN

EXPECT TO PAY £650+ USA

DEVELOPER: NEXTECH
RELEASE: 1994

■ We'll get the elephant in the room out the way first: no game, no matter how good or how rare, is really worth the vast sums of money US copies of this convention-upending action RPG – known as *Crusader Of Centy* over there – are currently valued at. It's so expensive it actually manages to make the already high prices of the uniquely translated English PAL version (as well as the beautifully presented Japanese original, *Ragnacenty*) look cheap, and to anyone still seriously considering an American purchase, we'd suggest saving money by buying a mint-condition Japanese copy and an entire one-to-one course's worth of written language tuition to teach you how to read it instead – we'd be surprised if it cost you more than a complete and immaculate US game did.

EXPECT TO PAY £85+ EUROPE

» [Mega Drive] *Soliel*'s boss battles are always inventive affairs, and often employ large sprites in conjunction with unique special effects.

» [Mega Drive] The places you explore are often intricately detailed affairs that go beyond forgotten caves and dark holes.

SILLY SEGA SHENANIGANS

RENT A HERO

EXPECT TO PAY £30+ JAPAN

DEVELOPER: SEGA AM2
RELEASE: 1991

■ This import-only exclusive may not quite be valued so low that it's within the realms of being impulse-purchase cheap, but at least a clean and complete copy of AM2's interesting and experimental mix of humdrum work and battery-powered heroism won't break the bank. This is odd, because in many ways it should be the perfect target for ardent Mega Drive fans. The game opens with an epic battle against your dad dressed up as definitely-not-Godzilla in your living room and only gets even more 'Sega' from there, using an intriguing combination of traditional RPG chatting, copious Sega references, and side-on beat-'em-up action. We'd recommend snapping up a copy of this one before everyone else starts to notice it. The later Dreamcast/Xbox game is a similar-but-different remake with updated references and an expanded story, complementing rather than replacing the original.

» [Mega Drive] How many games can you recognise within this virtual arcade?

PARODY CENTRAL

Sega's game likes to poke fun…

Not-Godzilla

Any similarities to any other green-hued kaiju famous for saving/destroying Tokyo, living or dead, are entirely coincidental. Honest. Luckily for our battery-powered hero, the only examples of terrifying lizard fury he ever has to battle are nothing worse than a man in a suit for the benefit of a cheering crowd of children.

Not-Sega

Your suit is rented from SECA, expertly hidden by a special SEnsational CAfe – a play on the name of a certain SErvice GAmes – accessing its secret research facility through the cafe itself… or more accurately, through a secret door behind the cafe's toilet. Being a hero for hire was never going to be glamorous work.

Not-Rent A Hero

This game is so keen on packing in the parodies it even finds the time to poke fun at itself, introducing a similarly-suited rival along the way – the modestly-titled 'Ultra Great Super Strong Fighting Salaryman'. As you'd expect from the name, their only goal is to make you look like the comedy sidekick to their glossy heroism.

COLLECTING TIPS!

Mod your Mega Drive
■ Some careful soldering and a little cart slot modification can make a Mega Drive truly region free – and even force slow PAL games to run at 60Hz.

Feel free
■ Many early Mega Drive games are region free – you're generally safe with releases from 1991 or before, but even later titles may not perform a territory check.

Know your market
■ 'Mega Role Play Project' Mega Drive titles with a thin yellow banner on the front of the box are incomplete without their matching pin badge.

Eyes peeled
■ Counterfeit copies are common: avoid reproductions, suspiciously cheap cart-only auctions, and always check insert and label art against a Google search.

TRIPLE TROUBLE

EXPECT TO PAY £120+ JAPAN

MADOU MONOGATARI

DEVELOPER: COMPILE
RELEASE: 1996

■ As the final official Japanese Mega Drive game, this is more than another remake of a great dungeon crawler from the creators of *Puyo Puyo*, it's a defined point in gaming history and a high-quality send-off for Sega's 16-bit hardware. For all these reasons and more, this makes it one of the more expensive RPGs on the system but also one that's more likely than most to hold its value over time as it's unlikely Sega is ever going to officially release any more Mega Drive games. Being visual-led and using fighting-style commands for magic spells also helps to make young Arle's journey through the tower more import-friendly than most Japanese-language RPGs.

» [Mega Drive] Arle's gigantic portrait is actually her health bar: if she looks happy, she's alright.

BEFORE PUYO PUYO

What happened before the puzzles?

Arle's earliest adventure debuted on the MSX in 1990 and from that successful starting point found itself ported, remade and reimagined for many of the most popular formats around at the time. Some leaned in on the inherent cuteness of magical girls battling gooey Puyos, while others were at times shockingly dark when compared to later cheery entries in the series. All, however, retained the first-person dungeon exploration and the expressive portrait of the game's heroine.

A THOR WALLET

EXPECT TO PAY £50+ EUROPE

THE STORY OF THOR: A SUCCESSOR OF THE LIGHT

DEVELOPER: ANCIENT
RELEASE: 1994

■ Gain the assistance of the spirits of water, fire, earth and shadow to defeat the master of the silver armlet in this smoothly animated action-RPG from Yuzo Koshiro and friends that was known at the time for using d-pad inputs that wouldn't look out of place in a fighting game. It's not cheap in any region, but at least current PAL/Japanese prices put it more at the 'birthday treat' end of the scale than the triple-figure US release (titled *Beyond Oasis*). It has been steadily creeping up in value, though, so don't wait too long to buy a physical copy. If those prices are too much, this excellent game can frequently be had for pennies in various online sales on multiple home formats, and can literally be acquired for free (with ads) on iOS and Android devices at any time. Do keep in mind the Japanese release is incomplete without its pin badge before buying.

EXPECT TO PAY £130+ USA

» [Mega Drive] Quick thinking is often just as crucial to your success as puzzle solving.

EXPECT TO PAY £50+ JAPAN

CHEAP IN JAPAN

EXPECT TO PAY £70+ US

LANGRISSER

DEVELOPER: MASAYA GAMES
RELEASE: 1991

■ If you're not overly concerned with condition, slightly dog-eared but still complete Japanese copies of this tactical RPG can often be bought very cheaply – and with a little bit of luck, may even come bundled with the game's equally inexpensive sequel too. The game was retitled *Warsong* for the US release and given an off-puttingly generic cover to crudely try to hide its international origins: this version is many times more expensive than the original but on balance still costs much less than some of the genre's other Mega Drive offerings. And although the localisation changes to some names and the 'de-animed' portraits on a few key characters are not ideal, they do cement this old release's position as a unique take on Masaya's fantasy classic that still has its own retro charms even in the face of the mirror-polished modern remake.

EXPECT TO PAY £20+ JAPAN

» [Mega Drive] Important enemy generals are often well protected by hordes of underlings.

MORE GAMES TO CONSIDER

SWORD OF VERMILION

DEVELOPER: SEGA AM2
RELEASED: 1989
EXPECT TO PAY
EUROPE **£25+**, US **£18+**, JAPAN **£15+**

LANDSTALKER

DEVELOPER: CLIMAX ENTERTAINMENT
RELEASED: 1992
EXPECT TO PAY
EUROPE **£40+**, US **£45+**, JAPAN **£15+**

MASTER OF MONSTERS

DEVELOPER: SYSTEMSOFT
RELEASED: 1991
EXPECT TO PAY
£US **£90+**, JAPAN **£15+**

LIGHT CRUSADER

DEVELOPER: TREASURE
RELEASED: 1995
EXPECT TO PAY
EUROPE **£120+**, US **£35+**, JAPAN **£30+**

YS III: WANDERERS FROM YS

DEVELOPER: TELENET JAPAN
RELEASED: 1991
EXPECT TO PAY
US **£90+**, JAPAN **£130+**

A BRIGHT LIGHT

SHINING IN THE DARKNESS

EXPECT TO PAY £40+ EUROPE

EXPECT TO PAY £10+ JAPAN

DEVELOPER: CLIMAX ENTERTAINMENT
RELEASE: 1991

Given the almost universal cheapness of this title when compared to most other Mega Drive RPGs, you'd be forgiven for thinking there was something wrong with the game, but this first entry in Sega's magnificent *Shining* series is a graphically stunning and fair dungeon crawler with a surprisingly excellent English translation that still reads well today. At the time of writing, Japanese prices are so low it's almost worth picking up a spare just to enjoy the beautiful full-colour manual artwork, and the English language versions should be snapped up quickly purely on the quality of the game alone. As with many other Sega classics, this has frequently been bundled in various digital compilations if you'd like to try before you commit to buying a boxed copy.

EXPECT TO PAY £30+ USA

» [Mega Drive] Many monster appearances are context-sensitive, and use a dedicated introduction animation before a fight.

NOT THAT SONIC

SHINING FORCE II

EXPECT TO PAY £100+ EUROPE

DEVELOPER: SONIC! SOFTWARE PLANNING
RELEASE: 1993

PAL copies of this polished and entertaining strategy RPG have always been hard to find – even around the game's release – so in some ways, the current resale value actually feels quite reasonable. The US version falls along similar rarity lines, and while inflated when compared to its original 1991 sale price, it's not yet tipped over into being utterly ridiculous. As is often the case, Japanese copies can be easily picked up for very little – so little, in fact, the game makes for a great first purchase for the import-curious, and rewards those who do not only with an eye-catching cover and an artwork-heavy manual but also a double-sided fold-out sheet: one side showing a map of the world and the other a handy quick reference list of spells, items and class promotions (in Japanese, of course).

EXPECT TO PAY £15+ JAPAN

EXPECT TO PAY £110+ USA

» [Mega Drive] *Shining Force II*'s animated battle scenes are a stunning sight.

MECHTACULAR

VIXEN 357

DEVELOPER: NCS CORP
RELEASE: 1992

'*Langrisser* with mechs' isn't an entirely accurate description of this engagingly tactical Japanese exclusive, but it's close enough to help anyone with a strong opinion of Masaya's long-lived fantasy strategy series decide whether they'd consider the middlingly-expensive price of this game something that'd be worth spending their money on. The self-contained and linear nature of this title's maps means it's relatively easy for language-limited importers to grasp – and that in turn makes its consistently mild resale prices something of a mystery, especially considering its continued Mega Drive exclusivity. This is definitely one for general Mega Drive collectors to keep a close eye on, and genre fans to grab sooner rather than later before everyone decides it's an overlooked gem.

EXPECT TO PAY £40+ JAPAN

» [Mega Drive] Battle cutscenes always accurately reflect the location, enemy, and even the weapons being held.

BACK TO THE FUTURE

More mechanical mayhem to explore

Hisou Kihei X-Serd

Vixen 357 wasn't the first time NCS meddled with mechs – this earlier work for the PC Engine, so old it uses password saves, is where much of the later strategy game's foundations were laid out before being expanded upon for the Mega Drive release.

Gaia No Monshou

Going even further back to 1987, this strategy title by the same developer, available on a selection of old Japanese computers as well as the PC Engine, has hidden amongst its swords and sorcery an extra scenario featuring jeeps, tanks and helicopters – a small taste of the sci-fi future to come.

DRAGON SLAYER: THE LEGEND OF HEROES

DEVELOPER: SEGA FALCOM
RELEASED: 1994
EXPECT TO PAY
JAPAN **£70+**

EXILE

DEVELOPER: RIOT
RELEASED: 1991
EXPECT TO PAY
US **£90+**, JAPAN **£30+**

SHADOWRUN

DEVELOPER: BLUESKY SOFTWARE
RELEASED: 1994
EXPECT TO PAY
US **£70+**

SORCERIAN

DEVELOPER: FALCOM
RELEASED: 1990
EXPECT TO PAY
JAPAN **£10+**

FATAL LABYRINTH

DEVELOPER: SEGA
RELEASED: 1990
EXPECT TO PAY
EUROPE **£15+**, US **£15+**

A HISTORY OF

THE ELDER SCROLLS

From its ambitious beginnings with Arena to the hugely successful Skyrim, the Elder Scrolls is one of the biggest and hotly anticipated series in gaming today. Here, we unravel the series' history and learn of its meteoric rise to fame

Words by Matt Edwards

» [PC] To swing a sword in *The Elder Scrolls: Arena* you had to shake the mouse from side-to-side.

» [PC] Just like the modern *Elder Scrolls* games, resting in an unsecure location can lead to an ambush.

» [PC] They may have only been released two years apart but *Daggerfall* saw some significant improvements over *Arena*.

If the rise of literature, cinema and even tabletop gaming has taught us anything, it's that building a compelling fantasy world takes time. It took JRR Tolkien 12 years to write *The Lord Of The Rings* after his publisher asked for a sequel to *The Hobbit*, and *A Song Of Ice And Fire* fans know they have to be patient to accommodate author George RR Martin's notoriously slow writing process. Compare the modern visions of *Dungeons & Dragons*, *Warhammer Fantasy* and *Warcraft* with their starting points and it's clear that even the most tangible fantasy world can evolve from the humblest of beginnings.

It's perhaps no surprise, then, that the *Elder Scrolls* series began life as a gladiatorial combat game. Today, the series is synonymous with finely detailed worlds, anthropomorphic cat-people and a sinister brotherhood that has a penchant for murdering innocents, but back when the original development team was putting a rough-and-ready concept together at Bethesda Softworks, *The Elder Scrolls: Arena* was pitched as a cross between a sports simulator and a dungeon combat game with capture-the-flag mechanics. It was to be loosely based on the Rutger Hauer film *Flesh And Blood*, but with the addition of side-quests and other role-playing elements, the dev team decided to ditch the gladiator angle in favour of a more story-driven experience.

"We had a beautiful world generated by fractals, which created a new world every time you wanted to restart the game", recalls lead designer on *Arena*, Vijay Lakshman. "This way we knew the spread of possible gladiators for your team would be randomised. It was really amazing and way ahead of its time, but when we tacked on the story, it became clear we couldn't regenerate the world as the story wouldn't hang together."

Ted Peterson, a man who bagged a writing position at Bethesda after responding to an obscure advertisement in the *Washington Post*, also helped shape *Arena*. "For part of the interview, they had me write a story about a team of gladiators fighting their way through a maze," Ted explains. "We were all fantasy fans, as well as players of the computer RPGs that were popular at the time – *Ultima*, *Wizardry* and *Legends Of Valour*. There wasn't much of a story in *Arena* at first, and then we began to develop one about your character's desire for revenge against a wizard called Jagar Tharn."

By procedurally generating every environment that wasn't a key town or dungeon, *Arena* remains the largest game in *The Elder Scrolls* series. It introduced players to the nine provinces of Tamriel – including eight of the playable races that would come to define the series – and it featured everything from spell crafting to a Sorcerer class that was inspired by the infamous Stormbringer sword from the *Elric Of Melniboné* novels. But despite the best efforts of the development team, the game missed its Christmas 1993 launch date. "The game was late and buggy," Ted reflects. "We figured there wasn't much chance of a sequel."

If Bethesda had called it a day at this point, the last 20 years of Western RPGs could've been very different, but thanks to encouraging sales, an *Elder Scrolls* sequel was put into motion with Ted as lead designer. "Because of the way *Arena* came together, the storyline was pretty clichéd, and I was determined that the second game would be different," Ted confesses. "I wanted a big epic adventure with a huge cast of characters whose motivations were somewhere between good and evil. I wanted the player to play the game any way they wanted and with any character. That really informed the design of the world and the systems."

Originally, *Daggerfall* had a working title of Mournhold and was going to be set in Morrowind. The location was then changed to the Hammerfell and High Rock provinces with a story that had six possible endings. "The buzzword at the time was nonlinear stories," Ted describes. "It made sense to let the player be the authority on how the game ended. We also played

ELDER FACTS

BE WHO YOU WANT TO BE

■ Character creation has been a cornerstone of *The Elder Scrolls* since the very first game. *Arena* had a total of eight playable races while *Morrowind* upped the count to ten, adding Imperial and Orc.

ELDER FACTS

REWRITING THE SPELL BOOK

■ Another feature that made the first game stand out was the spell creation system. There are over 50 known spells in *Arena*, but beyond that, you're free to craft your own sorceries.

TIMELINE

The key events that shaped Tamriel

FIRST ERA

1E 0
■ King Eplear founds the Camoran Dynasty, effectively kicking off the First Era

1E 668
■ The Red Mountain erupts for the first time and blocks out the sun in the process

1E 2920
■ Morag Tong assassinates the current King, Reman III. The deed ends the First Era as a result

SECOND ERA

2E 0
■ The Dark Brotherhood is rumoured to have been formed around this time

2E 321
■ The Guilds Act is passed in Tamriel. It sanctions numerous groups from the Ratcatchers Guild to the Prostitutes Guild

2E 582
■ The events of *The Elder Scrolls Online* take place

2E 830
■ Tiber Septim, then known as Hjalti Early-Beard, is born

2E 864
■ Events of *The Elder Scrolls Adventures: Redguard* take place

2E 882
■ Dagoth Ur and the Ash Vampires rise in Morrowind

2E 897
■ The Second Era ends at the behest of Tiber Septim

TIMELINE CONTINUED

THIRD ERA

3E 111
■ The Knights Of The Nine are founded by Sir Amiel Lannus

3E 370
■ The Eternal Champion, the protagonist from *The Elder Scrolls: Arena*, is born

3E 399
■ Events of *The Elder Scrolls: Arena* take place

3E 405
■ Events of *The Elder Scrolls II: Daggerfall* take place

3E 427
■ Events of *The Elder Scrolls III: Morrowind* take place

3E 433
■ Events of *The Elder Scrolls IV: Oblivion* take place

FOURTH ERA

4E 5
■ The Ministry of Truth falls from the sky and demolishes Vivec

4E 175
■ A peace treaty is finally signed between the Empire and the Aldmeri Dominion

4E 201
■ Events of *The Elder Scrolls V: Skyrim* take place

ELDER FACTS

THE MASQUERADE

■ The drawbacks sometimes outweigh the benefits, but becoming a vampire in *Daggerfall*, *Oblivion* and *Skyrim* is an interesting and organic plot twist. There is a cure, but only if you want it.

▶ *Daggerfall* as a pen-and-paper RPG before it was committed to code, so the characters, world and situations had been explored quite a bit. The whole backstory of the War Of Betony and the earlier tale of the Camoran Usurper were adventures we ran."

When they weren't throwing down the dice, the development team was thinking up ways to make the factions from *Arena* more integral to the gameplay and story. "The factions were part of the design from the start […] It was a matter of extrapolating what their histories and motivations would be, as well as what benefits you'd get from membership," Ted elaborates. "Including them as support was essential in our goal to let the player be as good, evil or somewhere in between as they wanted to be." And given more time, it seems the freedoms would've been even more flexible.

"We'd planned on letting you hook up with NPCs," Ted reveals when asked about the smut hidden within *Daggerfall*'s code. "Not only was there text, but there was art connected to it – pretty tasteful silhouettes of folks canoodling in bed, that kind of thing. R-rated at the worst, like the rest of the nudity that actually made it into the game. It wasn't a matter of censorship that it was taken out, though. We were just so late on our game that we knew we had to focus on the major elements, and sex was never essential to the major… thrust of the game."

Another former Bethesda employee who had a hand in *Daggerfall* was Michael Kirkbride. "My only real task was taking scans of famous paintings and *Penthouse* pinups and altering them enough so that we wouldn't get sued for using them as tapestries," Michael reflects. "To this day, I think altering a 64x64 pixel *Girl With A Pearl Earring* into an Argonian princess is a highlight of my career. I also drew the ire of Julian LeFey [project leader on *Daggerfall*] by putting clothes on all the pinup girls. He […] wanted live-action cutscenes of people having intercourse to play whenever you got married."

History will attest that no such mechanic ever made it into *Daggerfall*, but as risqué as the idea was, Vijay Lakshman describes Julian LeFey as both a "mad genius" and a "one-man powerhouse who could literally rewrite entire sections of a game to work correctly". It was this mix of creative thinking and technical expertise that led to *Daggerfall* being released in 1996 – complete with a procedurally generated world that rivalled *Arena* in scope; a story that focused on an ancient golem called the Numidium; and the opportunity to become a vampire, werewolf and even a wereboar.

Following the success of *Daggerfall*, Bethesda started work on three separate projects that were all set in the *Elder Scrolls* universe. The first was originally conceived as an expansion pack called *Dungeon Of Daggerfall: Battlespire*, but as the scope grew to include a dimension hopping storyline that saw the player facing off against Mehrunes Dagon – the same Daedric Prince that would later feature in

ELDER FACTS

THE REAL STEAL

■ Pickpocketing was something that featured in the first game, but it wasn't until *Morrowind* that the art of the five finger discount came into its own.

ELDER FACTS

WE KNOW…

■ Killing NPCs isn't a big deal in most games, but should you murder someone in cold blood in the land of Tamriel, you may be asked to join a very exclusive club.

Oblivion – the game was reworked into a standalone title. It's often regarded as the weakest entry in the series – partly due to its narrow focus – but its unusual multiplayer features also makes it one of the most daring.

If *Battlespire* is the black sheep of *The Elder Scrolls* family then *Redguard* is its equally quirky yet more successful cousin.

"*Redguard* was the game that created the *Elder Scrolls* world as we know it today," Michael states, "specifically because Kurt [Kuhlmann] and I wrote *The Pocket Guide To The Empire* to ship alongside it. It was the first sourcebook detailing the whole cosmology, mythology and cultural identities of the world's various races. Khajiit Skooma-addicts; Argonians worshipping sentient trees; the Dwemer as inexplicable mathemagicians who could divide by zero to remove themselves from existence; and the Nords' use of the Thu'um – these were all born during *Redguard*'s development."

As an action-adventure spin-off, *Redguard* didn't follow the same structure as its predecessors, but while the third-person perspective set it apart, Cyrus was the biggest surprise. "In 1997, it was a hard sell to have a Black male as the star of a videogame, especially one that wasn't a racial stereotype," Michael reflects. "I doubt anyone in the upper-echelons of Bethesda will admit that we had to fight for Cyrus not to be a white guy. It's sad that 25 years later, the industry is still resistant to the notion of having a person of colour as a protagonist."

Following *Redguard*'s release in 1998, it took Bethesda another four years of development before *The Elder Scrolls III: Morrowind* was finally finished. The game was originally conceived as a sequel to *Daggerfall*, one that would encompass the whole *Morrowind* province. This was later narrowed down to the Isle of Vvardenfell after Bethesda decided to ditch the procedurally generated content in favour of more detailed environments and more fleshed out characters. Todd Howard took charge as project leader, while Ken Rolston, an award-winning designer of table RPGs and former high school teacher, who, in his own words, "had the soul of a bureaucrat and knew how to handle restless youth", took the mantle of lead designer.

"When I arrived at Bethesda, I briefly worked on an early pre-production phase for *Morrowind*," Ken recalls, when asked about the original concept. "I don't recall any discussion about building all of *Morrowind* […] I suspect that Todd Howard was responsible for that decision. By the time I was ▶

» [PC] Even after kitting your character out with the best gear in *Daggerfall*, gold could still be spent on houses and ships.

ELDER FACTS

WELCOME TO SEYDA NEEN

■ The island of Vvardenfell may be minuscule compared to the procedurally generated continents of *Arena* and *Daggerfall*, but the detail and depth it offers is on an entirely different level.

HALL OF HEROES

A selection of famous names that have appeared in The Elder Scrolls

LYNDA CARTER
GORMLAITH GOLDEN-HILT

■ Known for portraying Wonder Woman in the Seventies, Lynda Carter voiced the Nord and Orc females in *Morrowind* and *Oblivion*. She also voiced Gormlaith Golden-Hilt and Azura in *Skyrim*. Her husband, Robert Altman, founded ZeniMax Media but sadly passed away in 2021.

SEAN BEAN
MARTIN SEPTIM

■ When it comes to national treasures, few English actors are more decorated than Sean Bean. He played Alec Trevelyan in *GoldenEye*, Boromir in *The Lord Of The Rings* and Eddard Stark in *Game Of Thrones*. He also voiced the equally ill-fated Martin Septim in *The Elder Scrolls IV: Oblivion*.

CHRISTOPHER PLUMMER
ARNGEIR THE GREYBEARD

■ There aren't many games that can boast Oscar-winning talent but *Skyrim* is one of them. Christopher Plummer, the voice behind Arngeir the Greybeard, won the 2012 Academy Award for Best Supporting Actor for his performance in *Beginners*.

JOHN CLEESE
SIR CADWELL

■ The range of voice talent that was brought on for *The Elder Scrolls Online* is, quite frankly, ridiculous. But while picking between the likes of Bill Nighy, Michael Gambon and Malcolm McDowell is no easy task, Monty Python cofounder, John Cleese, is the clear standout. He voices the eccentric Sir Cadwell.

KATE BECKINSALE
QUEEN AYRENN

■ British actor Kate Beckinsale is no stranger to vampires, werewolves and fantasy creatures thanks to her action-heavy roles in *The Underworld* series and *Van Helsing*. In *The Elder Scrolls Online*, she plays the headstrong Queen Ayrenn, the leader of the Altmer Aldmeri Dominion.

MAX VON SYDOW
ESBERN

■ As an Academy Award nominee who played Father Lankester Merrin in *The Exorcist*, Ming The Merciless in *Flash Gordon* and The Three-eyed Raven in *Game Of Thrones*, Max Von Sydow was brought on for *Skyrim* to lend his expert acting gravitas to the story. He voices Esbern, the last of the Blades

ELDER FACTS

OUT OF THIS WORLD

■ Just when you thought you were starting to get your bearings, *The Elder Scrolls IV* throws you a curve ball in the form of the Oblivion gates. What lies beyond is a living hell.

▶ working on *Morrowind*, it was all about Vvardenfell. I can confidently assert that nothing but the wacky concept art and mad ravings of Michael Kirkbride survived the earlier notions of a larger Morrowind."

"I was the art director on *Morrowind* and, with Kurt and Ken, one of its chief world-builders," Michael explains. "If *Daggerfall* was a classical medieval romance, then *Morrowind* was going to be the stranger in a strange land story. My elevator pitch to Todd Howard was *Mad Max* meets *Star Wars* meets *The Dark Crystal*. That, coupled with the fact that Kurt had written up scores of notes on its setting and I'd drawn up hundreds of pictures of what it would look like during *Redguard*'s development, made it an easy sell." It also beat *Fable* and *Knights Of The Old Republic* to become the best-selling RPG on the original Xbox.

The game told a story about the reincarnation of an ancient hero and his (or her) struggle against the malevolent Dagoth Ur and a mysterious disease called The Blight. But as engaging as the narrative was, Pete Hines, VP of PR and marketing at Bethesda Softworks, believes *Morrowind* had a deeper strength. "The focus was less about the story and more about the world," Pete says. "What's going on in this world? Who are the people that live there? What groups do they belong to? *Morrowind* wasn't a big hit because of its story. It was a hit because it offered freedom."

It also offered a fantasy world that was entirely its own. "People don't really notice that all native fauna of Vvardenfell have huge under-bites, since magical evolution would have dictated several species having to scoop food out of the ashen wastes," Michael ponders. "It was a conscious decision to make Red Mountain, the volcano at the heart of the subcontinent, very different than Mount Doom. Where the latter was a deadly destination of all evil, we were devoted to making Red Mountain a place of weird reverence and a multidimensional axis mundi for all of the disparate cultures involved in the game world."

With so many creative personalities working together over a six year period, it's hardly surprising that every aspect of the game was discussed at length. "We'd debate over details on everything," Michael admits. "The Dunmer equivalent of the assassin's guild, the Morag Tong, would be a recognised part of noble society to prevent outright warfare, borrowing heavily from Frank Herbert's 'rights of kanly' concept. And a native society who openly accepted a pan-sexual warrior-poet, Vivec, as their highest god while having strict taboos at every level would have thousands of years to generate just how those conflicts would work."

And even when the team couldn't agree on the finer details, things had a habit of working out anyway. "Ironically, I fought tooth and nail with Todd against *Morrowind*'s brilliant character creation section," Ken Rolston laughs when asked about one of the series' most iconic features. "He was right, and I was wrong. I thought it would be a train-wreck trying to combine an opening narrative, a tutorial and character creation. It was a complete nightmare but Todd just went ahead and made it work." Not only that, he and the team ditched the soulless expanse of the past games for genuine depth.

With a sudden surge in popularity, Bethesda didn't waste any time in giving players more doses of Tamriel. Some of these were pocket-sized, as was the case with *The Elder Scrolls Travels* series that ran on Java-enabled mobile phones from 2003 to 2006, while others were fully-fledged expansion packs. "*Tribunal* was mostly just stitching scraps and theme elements left over from making *Morrowind*," Ken confesses. "*Bloodmoon*, on the other hand, was more ambitious and challenging. It was a full-scale RPG game in itself, and Mark Nelson deserves most of the credit for making it so much fun."

If *Morrowind* is the game that stopped the *Elder Scrolls* series from being fairly niche then *Oblivion* is the one that turned it into a household name. It remains one of the most ambitious RPGs ever made with a map that's over 20 square miles in

» [PC] *Redguard* was the first *Elder Scrolls* game to enforce a third-person perspective. This gave it a more *Tomb Raider*-esque presentation.

ELDER FACTS

TWIST AND DRAGON SHOUT

■ Anyone who's played *Skyrim* for a while will know the phrase "Fus Ro Dah!" It's the first of many powerful Dragon Shouts that can be learned in the game.

» [PC] In *Battlespire*, players could team up to tackle the story together. It also featured a competitive battle mode.

ELDER FACTS

ARE WE THERE YET?

■ As the series' personal Everest, The Throat of the World stands proudly as the tallest mountain in Tamriel. Legend has it that 7,000 steps lead to High Hrothgar near the summit, but in truth, it's only 732.

size and filled with over 200 dungeons, nine major cities and over 50 hours of voiced dialogue. And in terms of people who saw it go from a rough concept to a functioning kingdom, few have more insight than the aforementioned Mark Nelson – writer and quest designer on *Morrowind* and *Oblivion*.

"I remember one of the earliest meetings for *Oblivion*," Mark recalls when asked about the team's initial goals. "Todd Howard announced we weren't shooting for RPG of the year, we were only going to be happy with game of the year. It would be set in Cyrodiil and Oblivion, the player would be Lancelot instead of King Arthur, there would always be a point of interest on the player's compass and horses would be ride-able. The first three were good ideas. But horses? Not so much."

Ken describes *Oblivion*'s development as a "Sunday stroll in the park" compared to *Morrowind*, but that doesn't mean it was all plain sailing. "The main quest went through a painful rewriting process", Mark reflects. "Originally, it focused more on making Martin into the Emperor. He began the game as nearly feral, and the player had to teach him how to eat and speak. It was ambitious but too complex, so all the designers sat in a conference room for a week and rewrote the whole thing." The end result was a living world that surprised the development team just as much as the gamers who played it.

"One day, when I started up a new build of *Oblivion*, I was surprised to discover lots of sheep hanging around on the landscape just outside a dungeon", Ken reminisces. "The combat AI had been changed so that fleeing people and creatures would try to hide indoors when something terrified them. This made sense for human behaviour but was very confusing for animals. Their intelligence scores weren't even high enough for them to get through the doors. I remember thinking how disappointed the sheep would be when they found out what was inside an *Oblivion* dungeon."

> **"We weren't shooting for RPG of the year, we were only going to be happy with game of the year"**
> Mark Nelson

Thankfully, disappointment wasn't something that befell the team as launch drew closer. "We were working 100-hour weeks when, out of the blue, Todd announced a surprise offsite meeting for the team at the hotel next door," Mark remembers. "There was no question we were all being laid off. The 100-yard walk to the hotel was the longest, most pathetic thing you can imagine. Turned out, it was a big motivational talk. Todd had randomly asked each of us weeks earlier what title we'd have if we could choose anything. At the meeting, he gave us cards with those titles on them. I was God Of Thunder."

Following the game's launch back in 2006, fans have debated about which game is superior – *Morrowind* or *Oblivion*. But it seems that even among the development team, the winner is far from clear. "*Oblivion* is far better software, a far better user experience, and more polished and consistent," Ken surmises. "But I will always be partial to *Morrowind*." Michael Kirkbride, on the other hand, views *Oblivion* as a step backwards: "One day *Oblivion* will be written off as a big, *Lord Of The Rings*-obsessed, poison-induced fever dream of Uriel VII during the final moments of his life."

The argument is further complicated by *The Elder Scrolls V: Skyrim*, an admittedly modern game that not only lives up to the series' open-ended legacy, but stands as the most detailed and deeply loved entry to date. And while a sixth mainline instalment is in technically 'in development', it's a long way off. Meanwhile, you can while away the wait with *The Elder Scrolls Online*, a game that has frequently seen meaty updates since its launch, the future of the series seems certain. "Creating an MMO is a different experience," Pete ponders. "We felt it would require a team of folks with considered experience making MMOs. We created and built that team with ZeniMax Online Studios so that Bethesda Game Studios could continue focusing on the kind of games it excels at."

Those games are undoubtedly single-player RPGs, the kind that lavish more mystery and intrigue per square mile than most other games can dream of, and whether it's the way your eyes adjust to the sunlight after emerging from the dank sewers of Cyrodiil or just the thrill of turning a whole town into random monsters after finding the Wabbajack staff in *Daggerfall*, every *Elder Scrolls* fan has their favourite moment. Some of these moments are shared through the central quest while others are personalised through the heightened sense of freedom and the depth of the world, but all of them are built upon the hard work of many talented and forward-thinking designers.

"I remember reading a later review calling *Daggerfall* a massively single-player game, which I thought was a solid summary," Ted surmises. "The design philosophy of letting the player loose on the stage as a catalyst for action hasn't changed since the beginning, and even though the graphics of 20 years ago look very dated, they were cutting edge at the time, and that's continued to this day." It's hard to say if the *Elder Scrolls* series will still be as relevant in another double decade, but so long as it doesn't lose sight of one of the bravest fantasy settings in gaming, it seems sure to prosper. *

ELDER FACTS

NEVERENDING STORY

■ *The Elder Scrolls Online* has had five major expansions: Morrowind, Summerset, Elsweyr, Greymoor and Blackwood. As of January 2020, over 15 million copies have been sold.

THE EXPLORER'S GUIDE TO TAMRIEL

IMPORTANT INDIVIDUALS:

1. JAGAR THARN
IMPERIAL CITY
2. KING LYSANDUS DAGGERFALL
3. FAOLCHU THE UNDEAD WEREWOLF
CAMLORN
4. FIGHTERS GUILD
WAYREST
5. QUEEN BIANKI
GILANE
6. KING LHOTUN
SENTINEL
7. QUEEN BLUBAMKA
RIHAD
8. JARL SKALD THE ELDER
DAWNSTAR
9. FANARI STRONG-VOICE
SKAAL VILLAGE
10. MASTER WIZARD NELOTH
SADRITH MORA
11. DAGOTH UR
MORROWIND
12. KING HELSETH HLAALU
MOURNHOLD
13. JORUNN THE SKALD KING
STORMHOLD
14. QUEEN HELLENA
LILMOTH
15. COUNTESS NARINA CARVAIN
BRUMA
16. COUNTESS ARRIANA VALGA
CHORROL
17. MARTIN SEPTIM
KVATCH
18. COUNT JANUS HASSILDOR
SKINGRAD
19. MAGISTER VOTH KARLYSS
CORINTH
20. THE MANE
TORVAL
21. S'RATHRA
SENCHAL
22. TREETHANE FARIEL
WOODHEARTH
23. VANUS GALERION FIRSTHOLD
24. QUEEN AYRENN
ALINOR

MAJOR LOCATIONS:

25. HALL OF THE VIRTUES OF WAR
SKAVEN

26. THIEVES GUILD
RIFTEN

27. THE COMPANIONS
WHITERUN

28. CALIXTO'S HOUSE OF CURIOSITIES
WINDHELM

29. THE COLLEGE OF WINTERHOLD
WINTERHOLD

30. RED MOUNTAIN
VVARDENFELL

31. REDORAN COUNCIL CHAMBER
ALD'RUHN

32. MAGES GUILD
BALMORA

33. MINISTRY OF TRUTH
VIVEC

34. HOUSE DRES
TEAR

35. SHADOWSCALE TRAIN FACILITY
BLACKWOOD

36. DARK BROTHERHOOD SANCTUARY
CHEYDINHAL

37. WHITE GOLD TOWER
IMPERIAL CITY

38. GREAT CHAPEL OF ZENITHAR
LEYAWIIN

39. HALL OF THE COLOSSUS
RIMMEN

40. CAMORAN THRONE
FALINESTI

41. ELDEN TREE
ELDEN ROOT

42. MOUNT ETON NIR
CLOUDREST

43. BLACKROSE PRISON
BLACKROSE

44. SHRINE OF SHEOGORATH
BLACKWOOD

THE
EVOLUTION OF
POKÉMON
TM

EXPLOSIVELY POPULAR IN THE NINETIES, POKÉMON HAS OUTLIVED THE INITIAL FAD AND BECOME ONE OF THE WORLD'S MOST POPULAR SERIES OF GAMES. NICK THORPE TALKS TO THE DEVELOPERS ABOUT THE SERIES THAT CHALLENGES YOU TO "CATCH 'EM ALL"...

It's extremely hard not to be aware of *Pokémon* – if you haven't been tempted by the urge to catch 'em all, you probably know someone who has. The videogames have sold over 368 million units, with some titles topping the 10 million mark. It's far more than just a gaming phenomenon, though – since the series launched in the UK back in 1999, Pikachu's smiling face has appeared everywhere from trading cards to cinema screens. However, it may come as a surprise to many of you that the origins of the series go all the way back to 1990.

The *Pokémon* series has always been primarily developed by Game Freak, a Japanese team which grew out of a fanzine of the same name produced by writer Satoshi Tajiri and illustrator Ken Sugimori. "When we first started, some of the readers were actually programmers and they had the skills and access to the hardware – that's how we started in producing videogames," Sugimori explained in a *games™* interview on the history of the series. The firm made its debut in 1989 with *Quinty*, a Famicom puzzle game localised for the North American NES market as *Mendel Palace*. That same year, the Game Boy was released and Game Freak moved quickly to outline a vision of a new type of RPG, which would utilise the handheld's link cable and portable nature. A design document entitled '*Capsule Monsters*' was ready by 1990.

» Junichi Masuda has overseen the whole series.

» Shigeru Ohmori directed the more recent entries.

When you examine the *Pokémon* games on the most basic level, they are fairly typical Japanese RPGs with a few key twists. The first is that as a Pokémon Trainer, instead of gathering party members through the storyline, you recruit the monsters you encounter in the wild. This element is present in the early design documents, though the original idea involved players ▶

▶ having a charisma stat, whereas in the final game they simply lower a wild Pokémon's health until it can't resist being captured in a Poké Ball. These monsters have special types, such as Fire and Water, which make some Pokémon more or less effective against others. The second major twist is that the games each contain a strong multiplayer element, atypical of RPGs, in which players can trade their creatures or engage in battles. Some Pokémon even require trading to evolve into their stronger upgraded forms. This was also a key part of the pitch document, forming the centrepiece of Satoshi Tajiri's vision for the game.

The final twist is that each game comes in at least two versions, with a select number of Pokémon absent from each. The brainchild of Shigeru Miyamoto, a friend and mentor of Tajiri, this was a stroke of genius – rather than having the ability to obtain all the monsters with enough dedicated solo play, players were required to engage with the multiplayer functions of the game. Also speaking to **games™**, composer and programmer Junichi Masuda explained, "People say that when you're playing videogames, you're usually playing on your own. So we wanted to create an experience where you can play the game but still play together with friends at the same time and all have fun."

The game went into development, changing ita title to *Pocket Monsters* due to trademark difficulty, and stayed there for a very long time. Despite having been pitched soon after the release of the Game Boy, *Pocket Monsters* wouldn't arrive in Japan until the start of 1996 – a time when the monochrome hardware looked to be on its last legs. *Pocket Monsters Red & Green* followed the standard RPG model outlined earlier, with the key differences changing the goal of the game. The single-player quest involved gathering eight badges from battling Gym Leaders – other Trainers that served as bosses – before taking on the Elite Four and your rival, as a final boss run. Once that was done, the social aspect of the game became necessary as you sought to complete your collection of 150 Pokémon.

The wrinkle in the formula was that there was actually another creature, the 151st Pokémon, Mew. The 'Mythic' monster was added late in development in space created after the game's debug tools were removed, an untested addition that would be unthinkable today. Luckily, Mew didn't cause problems – it turned out to be something of a solution. Unavailable during regular

» [Game Boy] The story in the games usually involves ferrying items around or beating up an evil faction.

» [Game Boy Color] *Pokémon Gold & Silver* established the convention of adding new Pokémon in sequels.

» [Game Boy Color] While *Gold & Silver* supported the GBC, both still worked on the original Game Boy.

» [Game Boy Color] Maps reflected the change from day to night, with towns growing dark and lights switching on.

play, Mew did occasionally appear via glitches and rumours of how to obtain it began to form. Mew was able to be distributed to cartridges at special events, the first of which was a competition in CoroCoro Comics which attracted 70,000 entries. Word of mouth spread and the game's initially sluggish sales turned around, later aided by additional merchandising. Though *Pocket Monsters Red & Green* were released in February 1996, they didn't hit their peak sales until the summer of 1997.

After a lengthy localisation delay, *Pocket Monsters* – now retitled *Pokémon*, and in *Red & Blue* versions – arrived in the USA in 1998, then Europe and other PAL territories in 1999. The slow build seen in Japan wouldn't be a factor in these territories, as *Pokémon* arrived with a co-ordinated marketing blitz that saw the TV series, trading card game and videogames hit almost simultaneously. A craze started almost overnight, helped along by additional special versions such as *Pokémon Yellow*, which starred Pikachu and took elements from the TV series. Ultimately, the first 'Generation' of games sold over 23 million copies. But while the first games were still making waves internationally, a sequel was needed for Japan and arrived in late 1999.

POKÉMON SILVER SCREEN

There's a good chance that your first exposure to the *Pokémon* franchise didn't come from the games but the animated series. It follows Ash Ketchum's adventures as a Pokémon Trainer, accompanied by his trusty Pikachu and initially Gym Leaders Brock and Misty, who were later replaced by a rotating cast of companions. Along the way they take part in Gym Battles and capture new Pokémon, and are regularly attacked by inept Team Rocket grunts Jessie and James, along with their talking Meowth.

The show has been a huge success and remains in production today, with over 1,100 episodes produced as well as an astonishing 23 animated movies. The first film grossed over $163 million and was briefly the highest-grossing movie based on a videogame – a record later taken by the 2001 adaptation of *Tomb Raider*. In 2019 the series took bold steps into live-action cinema with *Detective Pikachu* – which now has a sequel in the works.

The *Pokémon* cartoon series has had five episodes removed from circulation globally, predominantly to show sensitivity following real-world disasters, along with three more removed from the English-language run due to issues such as use of weaponry. However, the biggest controversy was an episode featuring the virtual Pokémon Porygon, which sent hundreds of Japanese children to hospital in 1997 after triggering fits with flashing imagery.

"You can still play together with friends at the same time and all have fun"
Junichi Masuda

Pokémon Gold & Silver served as the first massive overhaul to the series, providing a brand-new quest in a new region, Johto. The most immediately obvious new feature was a visual overhaul as a result of Game Boy Color support. However, the changes went far deeper. A battery-powered real-time clock was included in the cartridge, affecting what happened in-game. Certain Pokémon were more abundant during the day while others could only be found at night, and other events only took place ▶

▶ on specific days of the week. New Pokémon could now also be acquired by breeding almost any of your acquired existing creatures, allowing for exclusive moves. Two brand-new types of Pokémon were also included, Dark and Steel, which were intended to address some of the balance issues with the first game – particularly the dominance of Psychic Pokémon.

However, the big new inclusion was that of 100 new Pokémon. These included extra evolutionary stages for existing Pokémon, such as Pichu, the baby form of Pikachu, and Slowking, a second stage for Slowpoke which serves as an alternative to the first game's Slowbro. Also, another special event Pokémon like Mew was included in the form of Celebi. Masuda, who would become director of the series following *Gold & Silver*, explains the philosophy behind new additions: "I always like to come up with the number first. When I'm envisioning what the world is going to be like, I think about what kind of Pokémon people are going to encounter there, and then how many are we going to need, so I come up with the number first usually."

***Pokémon Gold & Silver* were massively successful worldwide, achieving 23 million sales in a much shorter period than the first Generation of games due to quicker localisation**. An enhanced third version followed with *Pokémon Crystal*, but new hardware was already on the horizon in the form of the Game Boy Advance. A new generation of games was already on the way, this time titled *Pokémon Ruby & Sapphire*.

> **"I always like to come up with the number first..."**
> Junichi Masuda

A BREED APART

Lots of alternative monster-raising games are available for hipsters to enjoy...

MONSTER RANCHER

FORMAT: PlayStation
YEAR: 1997

■ Tecmo's spin on the genre offers similar battling gameplay to *Pokémon*, but a very different monster-acquisition system. Players generate new creatures by putting music CDs into the PlayStation's disc drive!

DRAGON WARRIOR MONSTERS

FORMAT: Game Boy Color
YEAR: 1998

■ A spin-off of Enix's RPG series, this was the strongest *Pokémon* competitor on the Game Boy, offering 215 monsters and a deep breeding system which helped set it apart. PlayStation and 3DS remakes have followed.

JADE COCOON

FORMAT: PlayStation
YEAR: 1998

■ The game's unique look was created by Katsuya Kondo, an animator and character designer famed for his work on Studio Ghibli films such as *Kiki's Delivery Service*. Decent sales ensured that a PlayStation 2 sequel followed in 2001.

DIGIMON WORLD

FORMAT: PlayStation
YEAR: 1999

■ Bandai's rival franchise has never scaled the same heights as *Pokémon*, but the games are fondly remembered by those who grew up with them. One difference is that only one partner Digimon accompanies you throughout the main quest.

TEMTEM

FORMAT: PC, Various
YEAR: 2020

■ Perhaps the most clear and obvious *Pokémon* challenger we've seen, *Temtem* offers a multiplayer-focused alternative to Game Freak's long-standing series. It's still technically being developed and is only available as an early access project.

These games took place in another new region, Hoenn. "With the Hoenn region I wanted to go for a feel of abundant nature," explains Masuda. "When I was younger, my grandparents lived in Kyushu and I would visit them, and whenever I was there I'd always be catching bugs, playing in the river, catching fish and stuff like that, so I wanted to bring that feeling of nature to the games." The cohort of new Pokémon included 135 creatures, raising the total number to collect to 386. However, despite support in the code for all 386, only 202 could be caught in *Ruby & Sapphire* and trading with previous Generations was impossible, creating a problem that the developers would need to solve later. Major improvements were made to the battle system, including team battles in which four Pokémon could fight and a new ability system, which gave Pokémon passive powers that affected battle.

However, the biggest change was an expansion to the non-battling play available, with the inclusion of Pokémon Contests in which your creatures would perform their moves in front of a judging panel, in competition with other Trainers. "At the time when we were developing the games, we really wanted to think of a way to expand the appeal of the Pokémon games," reveals Masuda. "So we thought of a variety of ways that people could enjoy gameplay with Pokémon without battling them." Despite this attempt to expand the appeal of the series, *Pokémon Ruby* & *Sapphire* didn't sell as well as previous games. However, even a dip below par for *Pokémon* produces results that other series can only dream of – with 16 million copies sold, the games were comfortably the bestselling titles on the Game Boy Advance.

CARD CATCHER

Taking the battles from cartridge to cardboard

The Pokémon Trading Card Game, first introduced in October 1996 in Japan, is an unusual spin-off product in that has taken on a life beyond that of the videogames. It depicts battles similar to those in the videogames, with a few key differences – Pokémon are able to evolve during the course of the battle, and must utilise Energy cards to attack and retreat. The game ends when either one player has no Pokémon in play, or a player has revealed their six prize cards by knocking out opposing Pokémon.

When *Magic: The Gathering* publisher Wizards Of The Coast licensed the game for English-speaking audiences in the late Nineties, many players ignored the battling gameplay and focused on trading and collecting. The popularity of the cards was such that many schools banned them, fearing problems with thefts and uneven trades. A foil Charizard was the most prized card from the first base set – a first-edition copy in good condition can still fetch a pretty penny today.

The Pokémon Company assumed worldwide control of the game in 2003 and continues to offer it both as a physical card game and a digital version (for PC, Mac and iPad). But if you're looking for a more retro way to enjoy it, the card game received its own GBC adaptations, too. Hudson Soft's 1998 *Pokémon Trading Card Game* tasked the player with beating AI opponents in an RPG-style quest. It was well-received by players and critics alike, selling over two million copies and spawning a Japan-only sequel in 2001, which eventually received a fan translation in 2012.

> "We thought of a variety of ways people could enjoy gameplay with Pokémon without battling them"
> Junichi Masuda

» [Game Boy Advance] Some moves became more useful thanks to *Ruby* & *Sapphire*'s team battles, since they hit all opponents.

In 2004, *Pokémon FireRed* & *LeafGreen* were released. These were the first *Pokémon* remakes, and according to Masuda were a part of the plan as soon as the series moved to the Game Boy Advance.

» [Game Boy Advance] The GBA's graphics allowed designers to make towns that looked more realistic.

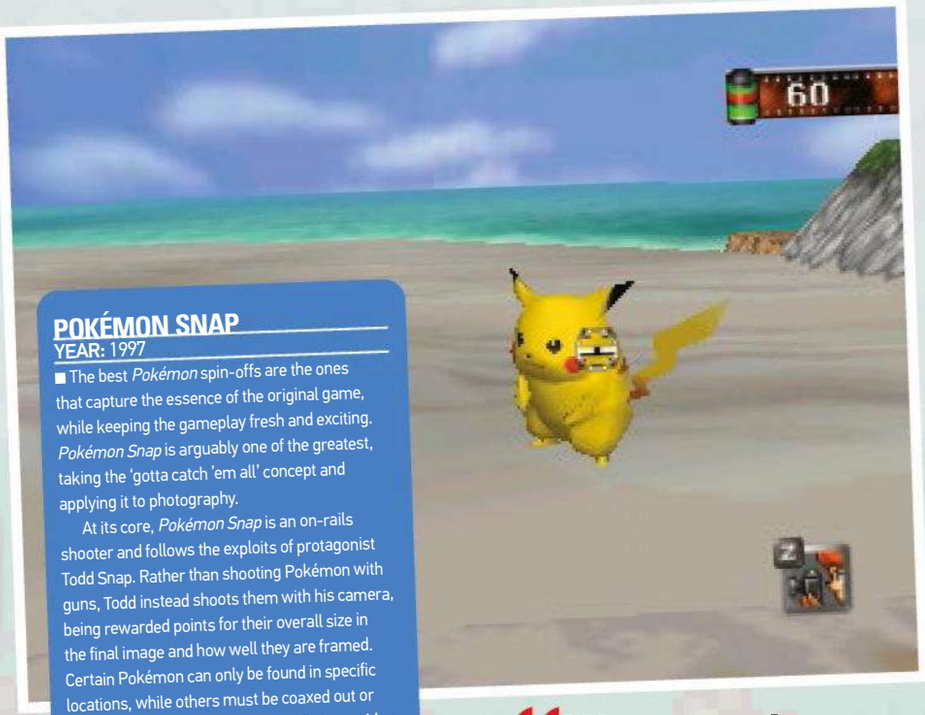
» [Game Boy Advance] *Ruby & Sapphire* introduced rival factions of evildoers to defeat – Team Aqua and Magma.

"One of the main reasons [for developing remakes] was really more of a technological reason, as the hardware couldn't communicate with each other between the Game Boy and the Game Boy Advance. Even when we were first developing *Ruby & Sapphire* we knew we wanted to players to be able to catch all of the old Pokémon as well as the newer ones." *FireRed & LeafGreen* were faithful remakes with improved visuals and some expanded content to include *Ruby & Sapphire*'s improvements, most notably an additional post-game quest in the new Sevii Islands region. Success followed once again, with critical acclaim and around 12 million sales.

The Game Boy Advance was superseded by the Nintendo DS at the tail end of 2004, but with *Pokémon FireRed & LeafGreen* having just completed their worldwide release cycle, it was clear that all eyes were still on the older systems. While the DS received the forgettable spin-off *Pokémon Dash*, the Game Boy Advance got *Pokémon Emerald*, a substantial game which served a similar purpose to *Pokémon Crystal* by providing an enhanced third version of *Ruby* & *Sapphire*. Fans would have to wait until 2006 to get their hands on the fourth Generation of *Pokémon* games. ▶

THE SPIN-OFFS

There are an insane number of Pokémon offshoots, so we decided to look at the best and worst examples



POKÉMON SNAP

YEAR: 1997

■ The best *Pokémon* spin-offs are the ones that capture the essence of the original game, while keeping the gameplay fresh and exciting. *Pokémon Snap* is arguably one of the greatest, taking the 'gotta catch 'em all' concept and applying it to photography.

At its core, *Pokémon Snap* is an on-rails shooter and follows the exploits of protagonist Todd Snap. Rather than shooting Pokémon with guns, Todd instead shoots them with his camera, being rewarded points for their overall size in the final image and how well they are framed. Certain Pokémon can only be found in specific locations, while others must be coaxed out or flushed by using a number of specific items. It's a great game and it's a delight that a follow-up was released decades later in 2021.

HEY YOU, PIKACHU!

YEAR: 1998

■ No doubt inspired by the interest in Tamagotchi, developer Ambrella clearly thought the concept could be applied to *Pokémon*. It couldn't, as proven by this innovative yet highly disappointing game. Players use the Ninendo 64's Voice Recognition Unit to interact with Pikachu. It can take part in a variety of activities, from fishing to making stew, but poor controls and rudimentary voice technology make it too frustrating to play. Spiritual sequels exist in the form of *Pokémon Channel* for the GameCube and two *PokéPark* games for the Wii.

> **"We wanted to go more in-depth and actually have Pokémon appear in the game world"**
>
> Shigeru Ohmori

POKÉMON STADIUM

YEAR: 1999

■ When Nintendo revealed *Pokémon* was heading to the N64, we assumed an awesome 3D-based RPG. We assumed wrong.

Despite our initial disappointment, *Pokémon Stadium* proved an essential addition to any Poké-fan's collection, due to its ability to let you transfer – via the Transfer Pak – Pokémon from *Red & Blue* and battle with them in glorious 3D. Fighting takes place across four cups, with the player choosing from six available Pokémon. It's essentially just the scrapping from the original games, but made better due to the impressive-looking visuals. We'd argue the sequel is the better game, however, due to some truly brilliant minigames.

POKÉMON PINBALL

YEAR: 1999

■ *Pokémon Pinball* was another early *Pokémon* release that proved Nintendo's Pocket Monsters were perfectly at home in other genres. It's most memorable for being one of the first Game Boy Color games to feature the underused rumble pack, resulting in an oversized cartridge. While the physics are a little off at times, the two tables – Red and Blue – are well-crafted and feature lots of interesting spinners and ramps. Best of all, however, are the 'Catch' and 'Evolution' modes that see you either trying to capture or evolve a specific Pokémon in under two minutes. And if you want that true Pokémon vibe, then use the Pokédex to catch all 151 Pokémon.

POKÉMON CONQUEST

YEAR: 2012

■ Quite possibly the strangest *Pokémon* game we've played, but a good one to boot. *Pokémon Conquest* is a kiddie-friendly strategy game that splices the popular franchise with Tecmo Koei's *Nobunaga's Ambition* series. It works surprisingly well with the player travelling the Ransei Region, battling Pokémon, warriors and warlords in a bid to unite the region as one nation. It's a vastly different RPG compared to the usual games and offers plenty of tactical play, while its weird crossover status should ensure it becomes quite rare in later years.

POKÉMON MYSTERY DUNGEON

YEAR: 2005

■ The big hook of *Mystery Dungeon* was that it was the first time you could properly play as Pokémon. The fact that its two versions let it link between the Game Boy Advance and DS didn't make it too shabby, either. For those unaware, it's effectively Game Freak's spin on the roguelike genre, with Pikachu and pals exploring popular locations from the series and taking part in turn-based battles. While easier than most examples of the genre, it's still quite tricky in places and link up with both versions is crucial if you want to gain access to all the available Pokémon.

POKÉMON RANGER

YEAR: 2006

■ Trust Nintendo to make drawing patterns interesting. Unlike previous *Pokémon* games, *Ranger* requires you to capture Pokémon by drawing specific circles around them. It's clearly used as a justification for the DS's unique control system, but it admittedly works well, getting quite challenging on later stages. Unfortunately, while the minigame-based capture sections are good fun, the main adventuring is pretty dull and feels quite light compared to typical *Pokémon* adventures.

POKÉMON DASH

YEAR: 2004

■ The best thing about this DS launch game was its ability to link up with GBA versions of the available *Pokémon* to create new courses to race on. Unfortunately, that's the only thing this insipidly dull game has going for it. Racing Pokémon through checkpoint-based courses sounds great fun, but the reality is vastly different due to incredibly bland track design and overly simplistic gameplay. Pikachu runs in whichever direction you swipe, which is as dull as it sounds, while a variety of different terrains and power-ups attempt to inject some entertainment into Ambrella's game.

» [Nintendo DS] While 3D visuals made their debut in *Diamond & Pearl*, not much else changed graphically.

***Pokémon Diamond & Pearl* brought a raft of changes for fans to enjoy, many of which were by now series standards.** The game took place in the brand-new Sinnoh region, a large island bisected by a long mountain range. Eight new Gym Leaders and a new Elite Four were available to battle, and 107 new Pokémon were added for players to catch, bringing the complete total up to 493. The battle system was also further refined, with many attacks reclassified as physical or special based on how they operated – for example, Volt Tackle became a 'physical' attack as it involves one Pokémon making contact with another, while Shadow Ball doesn't and therefore became 'special'. However, the most exciting new possibilities were a direct result of the series' move to a new platform.

For a start, the DS was Nintendo's first handheld platform to be designed for 3D graphics, which had the potential to revolutionise the way the games were presented. However, *Diamond & Pearl* were relatively tentative steps into 3D – battles received an improved set of 2D sprites so only the environments were overhauled in 3D, and they rarely offered much functional difference to their 2D counterparts. Still, they did allow for some surprising new design possibilities, as Masuda recalls: "One of the great things about moving to the 3D environments with the DS games was that we could do a lot more dynamic presentation, for example moving the camera around freely. It's kind of hard to explain, but being able to control the camera actually changes the

» [Nintendo DS] Pokémon can follow you outside of their Poké Balls in the second-Gen remakes.

THE UNLIKELY LADS

Some Pokémon that are freaky, unnatural and downright impossible

MAGCARGO

■ With a body temperature stated to be over 18,000 degrees Fahrenheit, this Pokémon is absolutely incredibly hot. How hot? Almost twice as hot as the surface of the sun, which reaches only 9940.73 Fahrenheit, fact fans...

SPOINK

■ This pig-like creature has a rather unfortunate life – if it ever stops bouncing on its springy tail, its heart will stop beating. That's right, it dies. We prefer a Tigger-esque state of compulsion to a life-or-death situation, frankly.

TRUBBISH

■ It's a bin bag! More specifically, it's a bin bag with tie-top ears, a broken glass mouth and arms that look like spilled waste, formed from a chemical reaction within domestic and industrial waste. This makes perfect sense, of course.

YAMASK

■ This ghostly Pokémon retains memories of its former life, as well as a mask it occasionally looks at while weeping. Oh yes, and these guys are human ghosts – so what awaits you in the afterlife, it seems, is captivity. Sweet dreams.

VANILLITE

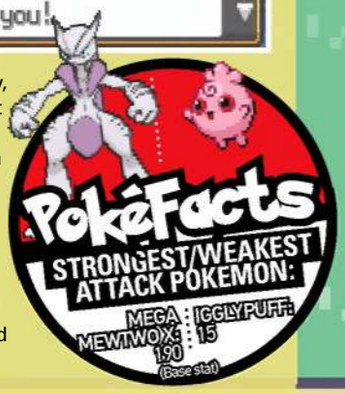
■ Created by British designer James Turner, Vanillite is a Pokémon which strongly resembles an ice cream cone. In fact, its snowy topping can be made to melt, exposing a bald, icy head. It gains extra scoops as it evolves, too.

▶ balance of the game quite a bit." In *Diamond & Pearl*, you can see this best in the design of the Gyms – for example, a low camera angle in Eterna Gym allows Trainers to hide behind trees.

The other massive change was the addition of online connectivity. The DS was Nintendo's first real foray into online gaming, and Pokémon was a key part of the software supporting the move. For the first time ever, players with access to a wireless internet connection could battle and trade their Pokémon without being in close proximity to one another, and without the need for additional peripherals. It was a huge step forward for players looking to complete their collections and prove their teams against Trainers worldwide. However, the advent of online play meant that nobody ever needed to leave their home to catch 'em all. It's at this point that creating a main series *Pokémon* game for home consoles might have seemed most appealing, and it's something fans have often requested. However, Masuda sees things differently.

"One of the reasons that we continue to feel that handheld platforms are the best place for *Pokémon* is that with a handheld platform, you can take the game with you. We really like to focus on creating incentive for people to meet up with each other in real life. For example, if there's a special Pokémon distribution, people will go to meet each other and fans will talk... about the games. Creating that kind of atmosphere, kind of like a festival, is something that we really like with the *Pokémon* games. Obviously you can also play them at home alone now, and that's another way to play, but being able to do both of them is one of the best parts of being on a handheld platform."

» [Nintendo DS] Legendries are typically encountered once, disappearing if you knock them out or fail to catch them.



It's an understandable position, especially as the handheld games continued to perform so well. *Pokémon Diamond & Pearl* sold a combined 18 million and were followed by an enhanced third version in 2008, *Pokémon Platinum*. A fifth Generation of games was on the way, but once again a remake project would serve as an interlude. *Pokémon HeartGold & SoulSilver* remade *Gold & Silver* as full fourth-Generation *Pokémon* games, with brand-new visuals and all of the system changes that had been implemented. They also came bundled with the Pokéwalker, an LCD toy that allowed players to transfer their Pokémon from the cartridge via an infrared link and raise their stats simply by walking around. The

» [Nintendo DS] Unova's urban design was inspired by metropolises such as New York, with tall buildings and subway tunnels.

» [Nintendo DS] Gym layouts have become increasingly elaborate in later games – even remade ones like this example gain some new tricks.

» [Nintendo DS] The regions of *Black & White* look more realistic, thanks to less grid-based map design.

device also allowed players to obtain items and catch extra Pokémon.

The fifth Generation of games, launching with *Pokémon Black & White*, was in some ways a radical departure from previous entries in the series. "The main goal with *Black & White* was to make the same experience for existing *Pokémon* fans as well as brand-new players," explains Masuda, "so everyone playing the game would experience the same surprises and joy." In practice, this meant that for the first time in the series, the only Pokémon players could encounter were the new ones. It was a welcome change for fans who had experienced over a decade of caverns filled with Zubats and Geodudes, and older Pokémon once again became available after the Elite Four were beaten.

Other improvements were also seen. The new Unova region, an urban area inspired by the state of New York, was the best-looking yet thanks to improved 3D visuals and map designs that were no longer constrained to grids as in previous games. Seasons now passed as well as time, though at an accelerated rate of one per month, and Pokémon Contests were replaced with the upgraded Pokémon Musicals. There was also a Pokémon Dream World feature, which enabled Pokémon to be sent to the internet to obtain otherwise unobtainable creatures.

Over 15 million copies of *Pokémon Black & White* were sold following the games' release in 2010, marking another success and ensuring the production of the now-traditional enhanced version. However, one more surprising break with tradition was left: a traditionally numbered sequel. "With *Black & White*, a lot of things from a story perspective were left unfinished, some of which were done on purpose. A lot of the staff really wanted to revisit those and tie up some of the loose ends," Masuda recalls. "I remember at the time a lot of people were expecting a *Pokémon Grey* to come out, but I knew originally that I wanted to put out two versions for the game that came after *Black* & *White*, as we had a lot of ideas we wanted to implement with that – two versions, we'd set the story two years later, and with various other elements of 'two' we thought we'd put that in the name." The games boasted greater differences than previous enhanced versions, with a substantially different story and new locations.

» [Nintendo 3DS] Old Pokémon like Mewtwo were updated for the first time in years, thanks to Mega Evolutions.

> "We really like to focus on creating incentive for people to meet up with each other in real life"
>
> Junichi Masuda

Pokémon Black 2 & White 2 were the swan song of the DS, which had already been superseded by the 3DS when they were released in 2012. Nintendo's new handheld saw its first major *Pokémon* release late in 2013, with *Pokémon X & Y* marking the series' first simultaneous worldwide release. Battles now took place with full 3D visuals of the kind previously seen in console games like *Pokémon Stadium*, and players were finally set free from four-way grid movement. A new Fairy type was also added, in order to balance the previously strong Dragon type.

But the biggest change concerns evolution. "One of the reasons why people like Pokémon is the fact that they evolve, so we wanted to think of a way to make this even more appealing," says Masuda, "so I discussed this with the battle system designers, the graphic designers and we came up with the idea of a Mega Evolution that would take place just during the battle." Previously, Pokémon could only change forms by evolving outside of battle. The new Mega Evolutions require Pokémon to be given Mega Stones to hold and they only happen during battle, reverting once the fight is over. "I really like Charizard, and I also like the Mega Evolutions of Charizard, but if it stayed like that I'd miss the old Charizard," he explains, offering some insight into why the Mega Evolutions are temporary.

» [Nintendo 3DS] *Omega Ruby & Alpha Sapphire* introduced the short-lived Soar mechanic.

While *X & Y* enjoyed decent sales and critical success, they didn't pierce the mainstream like that inaugural wave in the Nineties. 2016, then, was a shot in the arm for the series as it celebrated its 20th anniversary. *Pokémon Go* arrived in June, and caught everyone's hearts. This smartphone game put everyone on the real-world streets as they sought to capture Pokémon in real-world locations thanks to the game's AR technology. Soon after, *Pokémon Sun & Moon* arrived and it felt like Pokémon was experiencing a second Golden Age. These mainline sequels mixed things up a little by adding new 'Z-Moves' that emphasised the bond between Pokémon and Trainer.

Pokémon Sword & Shield followed in 2019, and took advantage of the Nintendo Switch hardware making it the first mainline *Pokémon* game to appear on a home console. These games were plagued with controversy, however, as they were not able to host all 898 Pokémon: the fans called the scandal 'Dexit'. Still, the games are still of the high quality you'd expect from the series, and the new Dynamax feature, which turned your Pokémon into a kaiju, was a hit.

If you've only experienced *Pokémon* passively, it's easy to write the series off as a fad, but this is a flawed perspective – with the original kids now grown up and still playing, the continued sales of the series rest on more than trends. You can see brand loyalty driving fan projects like *Twitch Plays Pokémon*, in which thousands of players collaborated in a chat room to complete *Pokémon Red* on a livestream. The truth is that the *Pokémon* games inspire that loyalty among fans because they're deceptively deep RPGs, with battle systems that have been stretched by dedicated players and multiplayer features that truly bring players together. In the age of online gaming, a game that can still pack players into the same room is a real classic – and that's exactly what *Pokémon* is.

» [Nintendo Switch] *Sword & Shield* let you 'Dynamax' your pals, granting them gigantic new forms.

RPG History

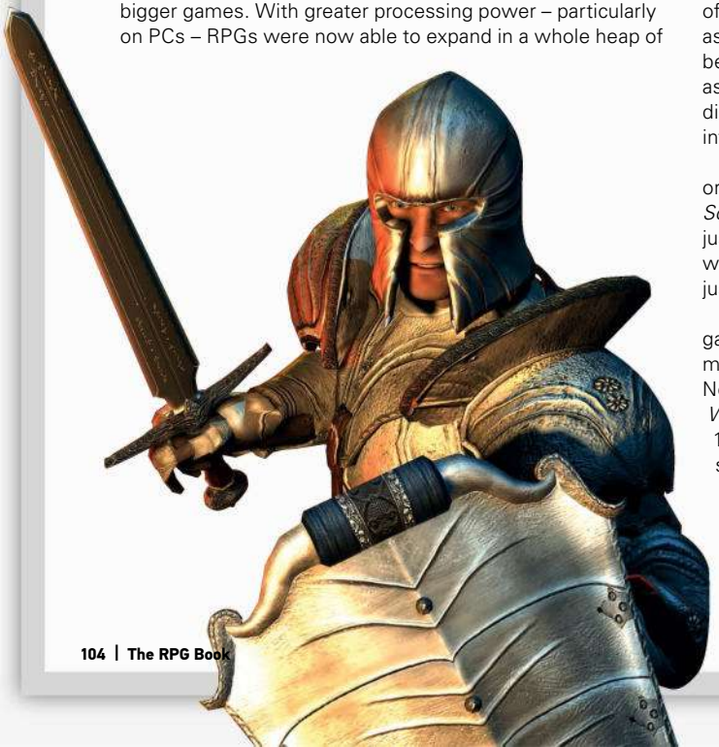
2000s

As the gaming industry starts to come into its own, the breadth and variety of role-playing games grows with it

Words by Adam Barnes

The year 2000 was a seminal one for the games industry; since in October of this year, Sony released its much-awaited successor to its PlayStation. The PS2 went on to become the best-selling games console of all time, and with it came the sorts of big budgets, big teams and bigger games that pushed gaming as a whole into a mainstream appeal.

RPGs, specifically, were also able to benefit from this massive audience, but they weren't only better looking or bigger games. With greater processing power – particularly on PCs – RPGs were now able to expand in a whole heap of directions. *Final Fantasy* still had its great successes during the decade, but in truth, the major shift was towards real-time combat and fully explorable environments. Whether in first-person or third-person, RPGs started to become less bogged down in number-crunching and focused instead on actually playing a role within a story. This meant that RPGs started to become more accessible to larger groups of players, helping the genre to shift its stigma as the 'nerdy' type of game and instead start to be recognised for their ability to empower players as they grew over the course of the game, had a direct part in important story beats and, of course, interacted with their insanely detailed worlds.



The likes of BioWare and its release of *Mass Effect* or Bethesda and its release of two particular *Elder Scrolls* games – *Morrowind* and *Oblivion* – highlight just how significant this change in playstyle was. There was still levelling up and RPG mechanics, but now it was just far more interesting for every type of player to play.

But if the decade could be defined for any one type of game, then it would be the MMORPG. Such 'massive multiplayer online' games had been around before the Noughts, but it wasn't until Blizzard released the *World Of Warcraft* that things changed. At one point, there were 12 million people actively playing *WOW*, and it became such a phenomenon that even those who didn't play games knew about this RPG, and numerous other MMOs sprung up after it. The Noughts were easily the decade that role-playing games became mainstream. ✱

GAMES THAT DEFINED THE DECADE

2000
Deus Ex

The release of *Deus Ex* was a revelation for many since it showed a way of playing games that was completely up to the player's decision. As an action-RPG, the numbers take a bit of a backseat, but no game released in the decade was able to match this futuristic RPG in letting players really play a role how they want to. Exploring a cyberpunk doesn't get much better than this classic.

2000
Diablo II

Though Blizzard's predecessor had already built up a great deal of success and fame, the improved online connectivity that had happened since the original's Nineties release meant that *Diablo II* could leverage its multiplayer component much better to great success. The bigger budget also meant that *Diablo II* could do so much more, too, and went on to be one of the bestselling games of the decade.

2000
Baldur's Gate II

At the start of the decade, PC gaming was its own little ecosystem and RPGs were a big part of that. *Baldur's Gate II* from BioWare was kind of the last 'big game' of its kind before RPGs were shifted into more console-friendly games. But boy was it a good one, highlighting the strength that a great tale can do to keep players engaged in a captivating *Dungeons & Dragons* story.

2001
Final Fantasy X

This would be the last time that *Final Fantasy* would retain a strictly turn-based combat system, as Square Enix also began to move more and more towards real-time action with its games. *FFX* showed how Japanese RPGs could tell emotional, sprawling stories with fully voiced characters, and it remains a favourite among fans today. *Famitsu* readers even voted it the greatest game of all time.

2003
Star Wars: Knights Of The Old Republic

BioWare certainly dominated the decade with numerous outstanding releases, but most will recall *Knights Of The Old Republic* as being perhaps its best. The Jedi-fuelled combat thrilled fans of the franchise, but it's perhaps the shock twist of the storyline – which we won't spoil here – that many will remember the most. It was better than the films at the time, that's for sure.

2004
Fable

Microsoft was in need of important releases to convince gamers to ditch the PlayStation 2 and GameCube and move over to its new Xbox console. *Fable*'s quirky, tongue-in-cheek style was married to simple yet enjoyable role-playing mechanics all with a fully explorable world that was rich in character. This wasn't a serious 'epic' like so many RPGs, but all the more memorable because of it.

2004
World Of Warcraft

The release of Blizzard's epic *World Of Warcraft* was a standout moment for videogaming. It brought RPGs into a living world, crammed with allies and opponents on either side of an eternal war that was completely filled with real-life players. Countless other developers have tried to achieve even a slither of *World Of Warcraft*'s success, but only a mere few can take a shot at this giant of the genre.

2006
Elder Scrolls IV: Oblivion

While Bethesda's *Morrowind* – also released in the same decade – brought the franchise out of obscurity, it wasn't until *Oblivion* that the *Elder Scrolls* series really got going. *Oblivion* simplified the fantasy RPG experience with real-time combat that immediately won over gamers who were playing on consoles, increasing its appeal and drawing numerous others into the world of Tamriel.

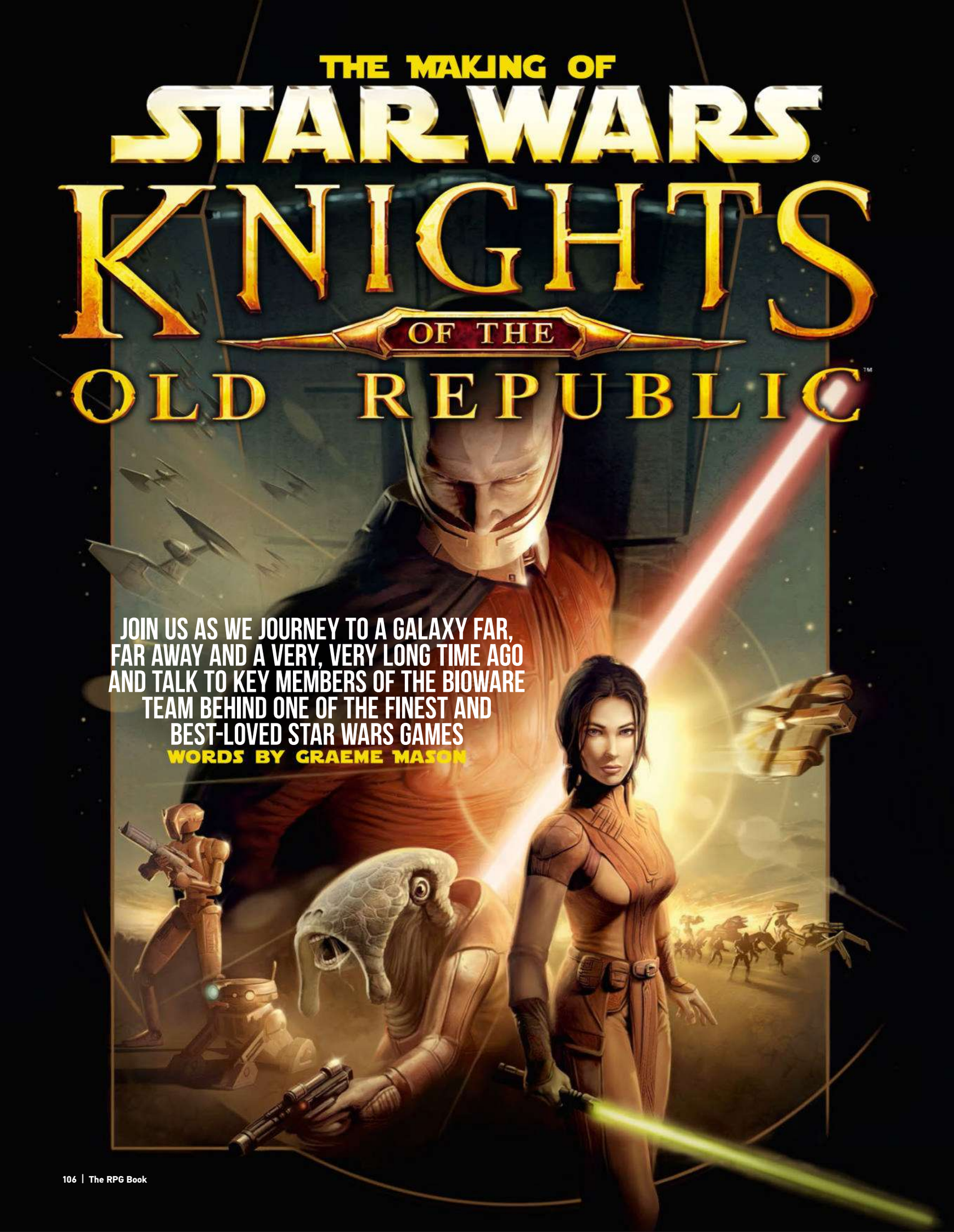
2007
Mass Effect

This epic sci-fi tale pushed the number crunching to the background but brought the lore and story that was so important in RPGs front and centre. It played much like any other third-person shooter but allowed players to really get into the role of Commander Shepard and all the moral decisions that come with fighting a space war. Later, players could import their Shepard character into the sequels.

2008
Fallout 3

Bethesda definitely ruled the decade when it came to RPGs. Having acquired the *Fallout* licence from Interplay, the studio adapted the unique post-apocalyptic world into a first-person shooter built with role-playing mechanics running behind the scenes. It proved that RPGs could be so much more than dragons and magic, so long as there's a rich world to explore and fun combat to enjoy.

THE MAKING OF STAR WARS® KNIGHTS OF THE OLD REPUBLIC™



JOIN US AS WE JOURNEY TO A GALAXY FAR, FAR AWAY AND A VERY, VERY LONG TIME AGO AND TALK TO KEY MEMBERS OF THE BIOWARE TEAM BEHIND ONE OF THE FINEST AND BEST-LOVED STAR WARS GAMES

WORDS BY GRAEME MASON

The Making of: Star Wars: Knights of the Old Republic

IN THE KNOW

- **PUBLISHER:** LUCASARTS
- **DEVELOPER:** BIOWARE
- **RELEASED:** 2003
- **PLATFORM:** XBOX, VARIOUS
- **GENRE:** ROLE-PLAYING GAME

It is 4,000 years before the rise of the Empire, the birth of Luke Skywalker and the Rebel Alliance. Yet the Republic, a democratic mass of aligned systems and worlds, is on familiarly shaky ground as the forces of the Sith Lord Darth Malak plague the galaxy. Eager to assume despotic control of the many systems, Malak is waging war against the Republic and its guardians, the Jedi. *Knights Of The Old Republic* opens as his forces ambush the Republic space cruiser the Endar Spire, forcing the player, in a scene familiar to the beginning of *Star Wars: A New Hope*, to take flight via an escape pod, along with war hero and top pilot Carth Onasi. Beneath the stricken Endar Spire sits Taris, and it is here that the adventure, spanning several worlds, encompassing multiple missions and numerous colourful characters, begins with a search for a Jedi named Bastila Shan. Across some of the realms we already know and love, and employing a very *Star Wars* theme of dark versus light, this backdrop to *Knights* may appear conventional on first examination; yet underneath the patina is an RPG that expands the lore of the *Star Wars* universe while presenting a superb gaming experience that enraptured both fans and those new to George Lucas' legendary saga.

Long before Disney began to create its variably successful *Star Wars* spin-offs, videogames were spinning a whole world of sci-fi built around that galaxy far, far away. "We received a cold call from Simon Jeffrey, then director of development at LucasArts," remembers Greg Zeschuk, BioWare cofounder and executive producer on *Knights Of The Old Republic*. "He reached out to us to see if we would be interested in doing a *Star Wars* RPG, and it was a true cold call – we'd never met or even spoken to him before." BioWare was just beginning to wrap on *Neverwinter Nights*, an ambitious role-playing game that encompassed a robust new engine for its fantasy tale. "It was a great coincidence," continues Greg, "as we were in the process of selecting a next project. It was an easy decision for us and our team."

By 2000, BioWare was an exhilarating company to work for, having already forged a gigantic reputation in the RPG genre thanks to the marvellous *Baldur's Gate* and its sequel, *Shadows Of Amn*. But the developer had very real shadows of its own to contend with. "I'd say it was always turbulent, but those early days were pretty exciting as we were always doing new things and learning about the industry," Greg says. *Baldur's Gate*'s spiritual follow up, *Neverwinter Nights*, became the most contentious project of BioWare's then

> "HE REACHED OUT TO US TO SEE IF WE WOULD BE INTERESTED IN DOING A STAR WARS RPG, AND IT WAS A TRUE COLD CALL – WE'D NEVER MET OR EVEN SPOKEN TO HIM BEFORE"
> **GREG ZESCHUK**

» Greg Zeschuk cofounded BioWare, and we speculate he could be an actual Jedi Knight.

» James Ohlen worked at BioWare for 22 years. Today, he's at Wizards Of The Coast studio Archetype Entertainment.

» Drew Karpyshyn worked on the *KOTOR* story, and has written *Star Wars* novels. He's now working at Archetype with James.

DEVELOPER HIGHLIGHTS

BALDUR'S GATE
SYSTEM: PC , MAC
YEAR: 1998

NEVERWINTER NIGHTS (PICTURED)
SYSTEM: PC, MAC
YEAR: 2002

MASS EFFECT
SYSTEM: PC, XBOX 360, PLAYSTATION 3
YEAR: 2007

» [PC] Fan favourite HK-47. Do we detect a hint of sarcasm?

» [PC] It might be set way before the movies, but locations and characters still look unmistakably *Star Wars*.

short history, mainly due to the technical boundaries the developer was trying to push, and the troubles at publishing partner Interplay. Spilling over into *Neverwinter*'s development schedule, a new publisher had to be found as work began on *Knights Of The Old Republic*. "From the beginning, BioWare was a multi-project company, so we were always working on balancing how to do multiple games at once," explains Greg. "There's always a finite amount of talent available, so we couldn't do them all full blast simultaneously." The core team of *Knights* would be constructed from a variety of sources, as the new scope warranted. *MDK2, Baldur's Gate II* and *Neverwinter Nights* personnel all combined to form *Knights*' squad, and as the *Neverwinter* development wound down, focus fully shifted to the *Star Wars* game, but not before creative lead James Ohlen and his team of writers and designers were sequestered to help get the fantasy RPG over the line.

Following that first initial contact with LucasArts, the first major decision was where, or rather when, to set the game. "We were given the option of setting it either between *Episode V* and *Episode VI*, or in the pre-history thousands of years before the movies," reveals Greg. "Understanding a bit about publisher and licensor management, as well as being given the opportunity to create some *Star Wars* canon, we chose 4,000 years before the movies, and were given a lot of latitude in what we created." A useful asset, and Greg smiles when we ask how far that latitude stretched. "The best comment from LucasArts in this context was: 'Just don't blow up any planets we'll need later.' Lead designer James Ohlen confirms the enthusiasm the team had for setting *Knights* long before Luke, Han, Leia and the rebellion. "The Old Republic era allowed us to tell a story where the fate of the galaxy was at stake, just as it was in the original trilogy of movies. One of my beliefs is that when working in other people's universes, it's important that you have the freedom to create

» [PC] This is not one of those *Star Wars* game without lightsabers.

» [PC] Who's that Hutt? Well… it's not Jabba.

"REMEMBER, THE LAUNCH TOOK PLACE IN THE DAYS WHERE CONSOLES WERE CONSIDERED THE FUTURE, SO WE THOUGHT IT WAS A BETTER BUSINESS DECISION TO DO LEAD ON CONSOLE"
GREG ZESCHUK

A GALAXY OF HEROES

THE PLAYER CAN RECRUIT SEVERAL CHARACTERS TO ACCOMPANY THEM ON THE EBON HAWK AND BEYOND. HERE'S WHAT TO EXPECT FROM EACH HERO

CANDEROUS ORDO

RACE: MANDALORIAN
HOME PLANET: ORDO

BIO: A veteran of the Mandalorian Wars, Canderous Ordo is first encountered on the planet Taris, plying his trade as a gangster's enforcer, before joining the player's team in order to find fame and excitement. An honourable warrior, he is a skilled fighter worth taking on the missions where you expect trouble (so most of them).

HK-47

RACE: ASSASSIN DROID
HOME PLANET: N/A

BIO: Constructed by Darth Revan with the sole purpose of assassinating key members of the Republic, HK-47 is one of *Knights*' more memorable characters, mercilessly eliminating its targets – which it calls 'meat bags'. Prone to killing its masters, HK-47 falls into your hands on Tatooine… erm, good luck.

CARTH ONASI

RACE: HUMAN
HOME PLANET: TELOS IV

BIO: An ace pilot and fighter with a roguish appearance, there's a little bit of Han Solo to this human. That's where the comparison ends, however, as Carth is a brave soldier of the Galactic Republic, meeting the protagonist on the Endar Spire before the pair elude Sith forces and escape to the nearby planet of Taris.

MISSION VAO

RACE: TWI'LEK
HOME PLANET: TARIS

BIO: The young orphan Mission is first met on Taris, at a bar called Jayvar's Cantina. Accompanied by a Wookie named Zaalbar, the pair provide intelligence and muscle to the player's mission before joining the team aboard the Ebon Hawk following the destruction of the doomed Taris via Sith bombardment.

Making of: Star Wars: Knights of the Old Republic

» Early artwork demonstrates the scale and beauty BioWare was aiming for.

stories as epic as what fans had experienced in other mediums." Drew Karpyshyn, a writer with extensive experience of the genre already thanks to his excellent work on *Baldur's Gate II*, its expansion *Throne Of Bhaal* and *Neverwinter Nights*, was predictably a busy man once more as development on *Knights* began in earnest, and the scope for new characters and stories ballooned. "The majority of my time went to the story, character and narrative side of things," he says. "We had a huge amount of dialogue – roughly the equivalent of 15-plus movies – so we were kept quite busy!"

Leaving the complex character depth and plot nuances aside for a moment, it's with Microsoft's Xbox that the story of *Knights Of The Republic* officially began. Eager to get a footing on platforms other than the PC, BioWare had already dabbled in console development with the Sega Dreamcast version of *MDK2*. "Initially, we had PC and Xbox versions of *KOTOR* running neck and neck during development," recalls Greg. "But we elected to have the Xbox lead SKU. Remember, the launch took place in the days where consoles were considered the future, so we thought it was a better business decision to do lead on console." As BioWare lacked the staff and support to perform a simultaneous release, the focus was on the sturdy brick-like Xbox console. Along with Ray Muzyka,

» [PC] You can't have Tatooine without Jawas and the nefarious, yet easily spooked, Sand People.

Greg liaised with *Knights*' project director Casey Hudson, bouncing ideas with him and the team, playtesting, reviewing progress and ensuring everything was tickety-boo as far as the mighty LucasArts was concerned. "Mike Gallo was our producer at LucasArts and he worked extensively with Casey; they always had a good idea of what we were doing," reveals Greg. "The fact we set the game outside the main movie storyline prevented too much detailed review of what we were building – I don't think LucasArts ever pulled rank on us for anything we built."

And what an epic build it turned out to be, from its dramatic beginning, Sith fighters buzzing around the tormented Republic starship, the Endar Spire, to the shocking destruction of Taris and the game's fateful and famous reveal regarding the player character. Along the way, friends will be made and friendships will be tested, as the Dark side of the Force inveigles itself into every facet of the galaxy. But before that, there's the traditional element of character creation. In *Knights Of The Old Republic*, this represents a halfway point, in retrospect, between the complexities of *Baldur's Gate* and *Neverwinter* and the smoothed-out process present in the *Mass*

ZAALBAR

RACE: WOOKIE
HOME PLANET: KASHYYYK

BIO: A relatively young Wookiee, exiled from his homeworld of Kashyyyk following a disagreement with his brother, Zaalbar strikes up an odd friendship with Twi'lek Mission Vao on the planet Taris. Along with his friend, Zaalbar agrees to help the hero's search for the Star Forge and bring an end to the conflict.

BASTILA SHAN

RACE: HUMAN
HOME PLANET: TALRAVIN

BIO: Strong of character and honour, Bastila Shan also possesses a powerful Force power known as Battle Meditation, the ability to inspire colleagues while demoralizing enemies. Commander of the Endar Spire, Shan has a key role in the player's mission, with locating her on Taris the first main mission of the game.

T3-M4

RACE: UTILITY DROID
HOME PLANET: TARIS

BIO: Don't let T3's cute appearance fool you – an expert in computer slicing and manipulation, this little droid is a highly capable hacker, and is vital to the success of the player's mission. T3 leaves its home planet of Taris aboard the Ebon Hawk, thus escaping a life of wrong-doing for crime lord Davik Kang.

JUHANI

RACE: CATHAR
HOME PLANET: TARIS

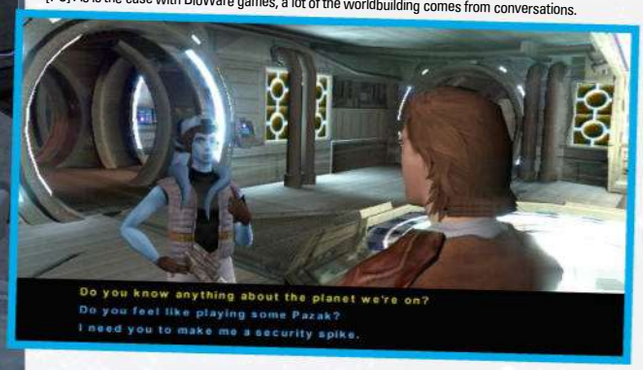
BIO: Sylphlike and feline in appearance, Juhani often struggles to balance her devotion to the Force with the fierce nature endemic to all Cathars. Juhani joins the squad upon discovering the Star Map, and is notable for being the first openly gay character written specifically for the *Star Wars* universe.

JOLEE BINDO

RACE: HUMAN
HOME PLANET: KASHYYYK

BIO: Self-exiled on the planet of Kashyyyk after a ferocious battle with his wife Nayama who had fallen to the Dark side, Bindo is discovered during the game in the Shadowlands region. A touch too emotional to be a true Jedi warrior, Bindo becomes friends with the hero, and proves to be a valuable member of the Ebon Hawk team.

» [PC] As is the case with BioWare games, a lot of the worldbuilding comes from conversations.

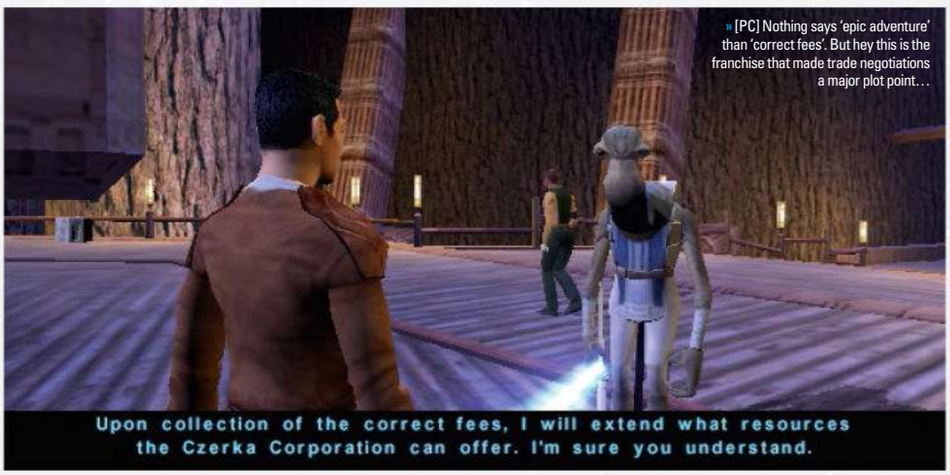


"WE DIDN'T WANT IT TO LOOK PRIMITIVE, BUT WE ALSO WANTED IT TO LOOK LESS REFINED THAN THE MODERN STAR WARS MOVIES. DEREK WATTS AND CASEY HAD THIS AS A HUGE TASK FOR THE FIRST FEW MONTHS OF DEVELOPMENT"
GREG ZESCHUK

Effect games. There are three basic classes, skills statistics and tiered feats, followed by Force powers that are unlocked once the player becomes a Jedi Padawan. And despite the popularity of *Baldur's Gate*'s Infinity engine, it was clear to BioWare that technology was moving on.

Knights would need a significantly different, more personal display, even if the combat was to remain lodged in the pause-action-unpause style of its previous games. "My memory is a little vague on this," Greg offers cautiously, "but if I recall correctly we initially tried to implement a real-time system, but soon realised it wasn't practical when managing your followers and your main character simultaneously. It took lots of tweaking to look visually good when running in real time, but also being able to give the player the ability to manage every single action. We went to 'pause-and-play' quickly, but it was still tricky!"

With art director Derek Watts, lead animator Steve Gilmour and programmer David Falkner rounding off the principal creatives, it was over to Drew Karpyshyn and his team of writers to get to work devising the hours of characterisation and plot that would rightly become the highlights of *Knights*. "We were excited by the idea of a galaxy with multiple Jedi and Sith at war, and also in exploring the way the Light and Dark sides of the Force came into conflict, or could even work together," Drew remembers. Each writer was responsible for certain characters, while Drew and James oversaw the process, ensuring the game contained a broad range of archetypes from both *Star Wars* lore and races as well as individual personality types. For the look of the game, the team settled on a mix of styles, acknowledging the timeline, yet attempting to weld a sense of familiarity to the setting. "The idea of how to depict an earlier version of the *Star Wars* universe was one of the trickier things we worked on for a quite a while," recalls Greg. "We didn't want it to look primitive, but we also wanted it to look less refined than the modern *Star Wars* movies. Derek Watts and Casey had this as a huge task for the first few months of development."


Upon collection of the correct fees, I will extend what resources the Czerka Corporation can offer. I'm sure you understand.

» [PC] Nothing says 'epic adventure' than 'correct fees'. But hey this is the franchise that made trade negotiations a major plot point…

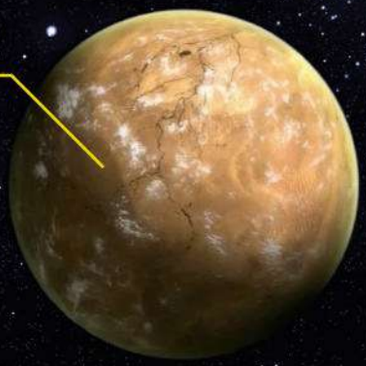
Yet it is *Knights Of The Old Republic*'s cast of eclectic characters, nine of whom can be recruited into the player's team, that most resonated with fans. From the conflicted Jedi Bastila, to weary veteran Jolee Bindo and Republic hero Carth Onasi, each character is so much more than a mere facade, with a latent backstory, motives and traits both positive and negative apparent in all. And as in all good *Star Wars* stories, the villain is both fearsome and pitiful. "Most of my focus was on Bastila, Mission Vao and Zaalbar," says Drew, the latter two an unlikely pairing of Twi'lek and Wookiee. "But I personally feel Malak was a great villain and – in the end – a somewhat tragic figure. I always enjoyed writing his scenes and dialogue." For many fans, the ruthless assassin droid, HK-47, remains a favourite. Dubbing all organic life as 'meat bags', the copper-coloured robot is an entertaining companion on missions, not to mention its excellent combative skills. "HK-47 is hilarious!" exclaims James Ohlen. "But Drew initially didn't think that Dave [Gaider, voice artist] and his take on the character were going to work. But when he sat in for the recording session, he realised what Dave was going for, and was pretty sure HK was going to be the most popular character in the game."

» [PC] The villain of the piece, Darth Malak.

BioWare's collaborative style, encouraging discussions, but seldom disagreements, was to the fore with *Knights Of The Old Republic*. "While Drew would have come up with the overall story, he would have bounced it around with all the other writers and designers," notes Greg. "There is always a story owner, but also lots of good feedback to consider." That story arc would focus on the most traditional of *Star Wars* themes, the balance between the Light and Dark side of the Force, imbued within the player character at

A GALAXY TO SAVE

SOME FAMILIAR NAMES AND NEW LOCATIONS, THESE ARE THE KEY PLANETS YOU CAN VISIT IN KNIGHTS OF THE OLD REPUBLIC



TATOOINE

This barren and harsh desert planet appears relatively unchanged from its frequent appearances in the *Star Wars* franchise, and is still infested by smugglers and pirates. Home to a somewhat bizarre Czerka Corp mining facility, this desolate world nevertheless contains one of the vital star maps.

DANTOOINE

Having escaped the destruction of Taris, the Ebon Hawk travels to Dantooine, home of the Jedi enclave. It's a green and rustic planet, and here the player must train in order to become a Padawan. There are numerous side-quests and a Rakatan temple that reveals crucial information regarding the location of the Star Forge.

TARIS

Located in the Outer Rim territories, Taris is the dense ecumenopolis (city) planet that the player first arrives at following the Sith capture of the Endar Spire. Conquered by the Sith, Taris is placed under martial law and ultimately ravaged in a terrifying bombardment from which it takes decades to recover.

KASHYYYK

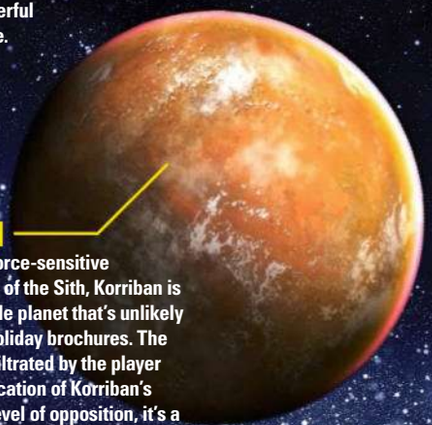
Kashyyyk is the home world of the Wookiees, a lush and verdant planet dotted with gargantuan trees. Here lies another star map and a whole bunch of walking carpets, some of whom don't take too kindly to an upstart Jedi and their mates rolling in. The Czerka Corporation is in force here, and you'll need to stump up 100 credits just for the honour of landing.

MANAAN

A primarily Ocean planet, Manaan is the home of an aquatic race known as the Selkath. A peaceful species, the Selkath manufacture and sell a healing plant to the Sith and Republic, both of whom have a base on the planet. An interesting set of locations, surrounded by sleek grey walls and the powerful crashing waters outside.

RAKATA PRIME

Given the mysterious nomenclature of 'Unknown World', Rakata Prime is the home of the ancient Rakata race. Technologically advanced, and deeply ensconced within the Dark side of the Force, the Rakata enslaved the galaxy during a reign known as the Infinite Empire. It is the location of the Star Forge, a powerful device that must be destroyed in order to save the present galaxy from a similar fate.



KORRIBAN

Infested with vicious Force-sensitive Terentateks and the home of the Sith, Korriban is a desolate and inhospitable planet that's unlikely to feature in any galaxy holiday brochures. The Sith Academy must be infiltrated by the player in order to discover the location of Korriban's Star Map, and given the level of opposition, it's a mission best left to last.

KOTOR: THE MOVIE

MIXED THOUGHTS FROM THE DEVELOPMENT TEAM ON A POSSIBLE CINEMATIC OUTING FOR THE OLD REPUBLIC

When *Buzzfeed* announced back in May 2019 that several sources had revealed a *Knights Of The Old Republic* script was in development, there was predictable excitement generated among fans. With Disney having scaled back its *Star Wars* spin-offs following the disappointing box office of *Solo*, the immediate appearance of a movie set 4,000 years before every cinematic outing so far seems unlikely. But what does the team behind the game make of the potential? "I think it would be great, but I don't think it should be modelled after the game, which has a story purposely derivative of the movies," says James. "One example of this is the showdown, which I ripped from the lightsaber duel at the end of *The Empire Strikes Back*. People don't notice because they are the protagonist in an interactive game." Writer Drew Karpyshyn agrees. "It would be interesting to see, but honestly I don't know if it's a good idea. *Knights* was written as a game, and has too many characters and complexity for a movie, so huge chunks would end up getting cut." With much of the appeal of the game coming from its interactive nature and the role of the player within it, a game set 4,000 years in *Star Wars*' history would require a new plot and characters. "I think it would be cool," says Greg, "but I'm not really expecting anything. Many things are optioned for movies, but few are actually made."

» [PC] Arriving too late to save the crew of the Endar Spire.

a much higher level than they might at first suspect, which brings us neatly to *Knights Of The Old Republic*'s famous twist, a jaw-dropping moment that is preceded by a series of subtle hints that point towards the true origin of your very own character. **For those who haven't played yet, beware, as here spoilers there are**. "I liked the twist," remembers Drew, "but I knew it would all come down to execution and presentation. If you tell people a twist, it always sounds forced, clunky or blatantly obvious; the real trick is to give them a story that lays the groundwork for the twist, while also being entertaining on its own." The result, at least in *Knights*, feels natural yet surprising, instead of strained or incongruous, as the player is revealed to be Darth Revan, former ally of chief antagonist Darth Malak, memory-wiped by Bastila Shan, and now in the service of the Republic as a mere footsoldier. "The idea of the main character being the villain was something that came from a brainstorming session I had with Cam Tofer," recalls James. "The twist that ended up in the story was mostly me and Drew watching *The Sixth Sense* and *Fight Club* and using them as templates for how to do that kind of twist." The former movie in particular taught BioWare the value of foreshadowing the abrupt turn of events, leaving enough clues so that alert and focused players could figure out what was happening, thus avoiding the revelation feeling like it had come out of the blue. "I was hyper-focused on that," notes Drew, "dropping these clues and lines in at various critical path junctures, then explicitly referring back to them during the actual moment when you discover your true identity."

> "I'M MORE A CONTENT DESIGNER THAN A GAME DESIGNER, SO I WANTED TO FOCUS ON THE CONTENT, RATHER THAN DEVELOPING A NEW GAMES SYSTEM. THEREFORE, USING NEVERWINTER AS A JUMPING OFF POINT MADE A LOT OF SENSE"
> **JAMES OHLEN**

With the game utilising *Neverwinter Nights*' Aurora engine – branched off and customized along with elements of *MDK2* – the technical development of *Knights Of The Old Republic* hit little more than the usual highs and lows of creating an ambitious videogame on relatively new hardware. "We had already developed choreographed combat in *Neverwinter Nights*, which was integral to getting across lightsaber duels," James recalls. "I'm more a content designer than a game designer, so I wanted to focus on the content, rather than developing a new games system. Therefore, using *Neverwinter* as a jumping off point made a lot of sense." As development began to march slowly, but steadily, towards the end straight, James focused on polishing the game via his own playtesting, internal testing and soliciting feedback from LucasArts. "I'm pretty sure I played *Knights* more than anyone else before it shipped," he jokes. "But I was really tired of the game by the time it was done." Meanwhile Drew Karpyshyn, having overseen the key intricacies of storyline and characterisation, tried to ensure inconsistencies were spotted as soon as possible in order to

» [Xbox] An early Jedi-Sith clash aboard the stricken Endar Spire.

» [PC] The Ebon Hawk's design echoes a more famous 'hunk of junk'.

» [PC] Preparing to slice up a Tusken Raider on Tatooine.

minimize any impact on development. But with a game the size, ambition and innovation of *Knights*, there were two notorious aspects of the industry that could not fail to rear their ugly heads: crunch and bugs. "Every BioWare games has thousands of bugs!" exclaims James. "And we always spend months squashing them." Stomping on digital insects aside, it was the nascent Microsoft hardware that often caused issues, specifically its CD drive, as Greg explains. "One of the main issues we faced – and one Microsoft was loathe to talk about – is that we streamed off the Xbox CD disc in real time, especially for the voices, and what we didn't know was that the Xbox didn't have consistent disc performance." Faced with troubleshooting the various issues, Microsoft revealed that they had used multiple models of disc drives within the console, some of them more reliable than others, leaving BioWare with little option but to plough on regardless.

And then there's the crunch. Drew Karpysyhn recalls in particular the rush towards the end of *Knights*' development. "BioWare crunch is almost always brutal," he laments. "Many people on the team put in months of 80-plus hour weeks, and towards the end some people were working 100-plus hours per week. We tried to limit it to six days per week, leaving at 9pm on weekdays and 6pm on Saturdays, with Sundays off. However, many people ignored those hours and worked overtime, including all of the senior people. In the final few weeks, I put in several 30-plus-hour

KNIGHTS OF THE MOBILE REPUBLIC

IS THE FORCE STRONG WITH THIS MOBILE CONVERSION?

By the miracle of modern technology, it is now possible to have the complete *Knights Of The Old Republic* experience on the go, thanks to Aspyr's excellent port for iPad, iPhone and Android. Given a sparkling sheen, the graphical lustre in particular shines on these devices, with the expanses of planets such as Tatooine and Manaan looking impressively lush and azure. Adapted for use with touch controls, the game also works well, with the player able to dart their squad around each world with ease, wielding lightsabers and blasters against the numerous enemies. Almost every other aspect of the original game survives intact, only now you can travel to the Sith Academy on Korriban while on the bus, or take on Darth Malak and his Sith horde while waiting at the dentist. Grounded with the same epic plot and characters, *KOTOR* mobile is a fantastic game for those looking to relive one of the finest *Star Wars* games, or to play it for the very first time.

THERE IS ANOTHER...

THE OLD REPUBLIC PAID HOST TO A COUPLE MORE GAMES

Following the success of *Knights Of The Old Republic*, BioWare was succeeded by Obsidian for the sequel *The Sith Lords*. Utilising the same engine, Odyssey, the game follows a new character known as 'The Exile', an exiled Jedi Knight at a time when the order has almost been wiped out by the evil Sith. While graphically similar, Obsidian made several tweaks to the style of gameplay pioneered by the first game, including a smoother party system and a large range of new Force powers. Once more relying heavily on characterisation, interaction and plot to drive the experience, the player's teammates can now be influenced directly by their actions. *The Sith Lords* was released in 2004 on Xbox, and early the following year on PC, to general high acclaim, despite criticisms that it was similar to the original. Work on a third single-player game began in 2004, but failed to proceed beyond early concept art, story, world and quest designs. Then, at 2008 E3, BioWare and LucasArts confirmed they were working on a long-rumoured MMORPG set in the Old Republic. Released in 2011, *Star Wars: The Old Republic* is set 300 years after the events of the first two games as another war threatens to consume the galaxy. Players are able to join either the Jedi or Sith, while offering a moral complexity beyond this binary choice. Phenomenally successful upon release, *The Old Republic* has since received several expansions and seen a move from subscription to a free-to-play model – and it still operates today, making it an ideal way to dip back into this mysterious and fascinating era of the *Star Wars* franchise.

KNIGHTS OF THE OLD REPUBLIC: THE TRIVIA FILE

FIVE MORE SNIPPETS OF INFORMATION, FRESH FROM THE COMPUTER BANKS OF THE EBON HAWK

1 **GameCube and PlayStation 2 versions were never considered, due to Microsoft exclusivity.**

2 **An early idea was to have the player be a clone of Revan, before LucasArts told BioWare that clone stories were off the table. A few months later the next film, *Attack Of The Clones*, was announced.**

3 **Just before LucasArts contacted BioWare, James Ohlen and Ray Muzyka were mulling over a licence of a relatively under-the-radar book at the time called *A Game Of Thrones*.**

4 **Members *of KOTOR*'s cast appeared in BioWare's *Mass Effect* – notably Jennifer Hale (Bastilla) and Raphael Sbarge (Carth).**

5 **Many of *KOTOR*'s characters came from James Ohlen's childhood *Star Wars* tabletop campaign by West End Games.**

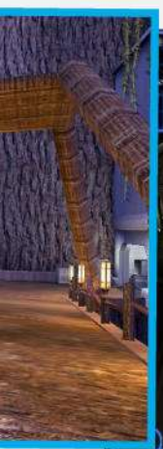
» [PC] Here we are exploring the prestigious Starfleet Academy.

» [PC] Familiar locations appear in *Knights*, such as the Wookiee homeworld of Kashyyyk (bless you).

shifts as we scrambled to get it approved for the gold [master] disk." While not quite as grave, James acknowledges the urgency to finish off *Knights* was critical towards the end. "There was crunch, but we got the game done before summer, so it wasn't too bad. But if we had pushed into summer, I think most of us would have lost our minds." Nevertheless, in a mighty fine videogame that had its development stretched right to the very limit, James still harbours some regrets. "It would have been great to get more of the epic battles that are so important to why *Star Wars* is awesome – the 'wars' part is so integral to the franchise," he notes. Despite the wonderful depth to *Knights*, it's hard to disagree given most fans fell in love and were mesmerised by imposing Star Destroyers, waspish X-wing fighters and the gangling, ponderous AT-ATs of *The Empire Strikes Back*. It's a somewhat harsh analysis, not shared by Greg, or Drew. "Considering it was one of BioWare's biggest hits, won multiple Game Of The Year awards and is still beloved by millions, I don't think I can have any regrets," says the latter.

> "THERE WAS CRUNCH, BUT WE GOT THE GAME DONE BEFORE SUMMER, SO IT WASN'T TOO BAD. BUT IF WE HAD PUSHED INTO SUMMER, I THINK MOST OF US WOULD HAVE LOST OUR MINDS"
> **JAMES OHLEN**

Upon release, *Knights Of The Old Republic* was indeed a worldwide smash hit, and a pleasant surprise to many fans jaded by the prequel trilogy episodes *The Phantom Menace* and *Attack Of The Clones*. And it proved a relief, albeit a temporary one, at BioWare. "We didn't really have time to sit back and enjoy [the success]," says Drew. "By then, we were already dealing with the next crisis, whether it be *Neverwinter Nights II*,



» [PC] Combat took cues from *the D&D* system found in BioWare's previous RPGs.

» A remake of *Knights Of The Old Republic* was announced in 2021, reigniting interest in the series.

Jade Empire, *Dragon Age* – we had a lot going on." While James admits he "had no idea how people were going to react to it", executive producer Greg, also cofounder of the renowned developer, says, "I'm proud of all our games – it's difficult to even release a game, so to have made a number of beloved games that were also commercially successful is a pretty shocking thing. And I think without doubt that *Knights Of The Old Republic* is one of our best, and certainly the right game at the right time." With *Knights* a triumph, LucasArts' thoughts turned inevitably to a sequel, although sadly the continuing storyline was not taken up by BioWare. "They [LucasArts] wanted a tight timeline for the sequel, and we didn't feel we could deliver what we wanted within that timeframe," says Greg. "What we did do, was connect them to the folks at Obsidian and ensure that the process went smoothly, so there was another game in the series for fans to play." Set five years after the events of the first game, *The Sith Lords* sees the vengeful Sith tighten its grip on the galaxy, while introducing several new elements such as fresh Force powers and more interactive team characters. Packaged up in a familiar engine, it's a sincere case of more of the same, yet neatly wrapped the story, and while not in the league of the original's sales figures, was another hit nonetheless.

It was that original that transformed RPGs, from the nerdy trappings of the *Baldur's Gate* games to modern, impressive graphics, migrated away from the traditional PC home of the genre. "I think it's a great game, and it had a huge impact on BioWare and the CRPG industry as a whole," Drew notes. "Yes, the graphics may be a bit dated now, but the story still stands up today." The combination of the *Star Wars* IP, story, characterisation and the epic sweep that BioWare infused into *Knights* has made it the classic it is quite rightly regarded as over 15 years later. "*KOTOR* influenced what I wanted to do with *Dragon Age*, and also led to *Star Wars: The Old Republic*," concludes James Ohlen. "And I'm so very proud of it. My son is a big *Star Wars* fan, so it's great that it's so highly regarded by so many fans of *Star Wars*." For Drew Karpyshyn, his work on *Knights* led to a career that has encompassed original sci-fi epics *Mass Effect* and *Mass Effect 2*, the influence on which can be clearly seen. "It also helped land me my first *Star Wars* novel, *Darth Bane: Path Of Destruction*," he says, "so it really helped to kick my writing career to another level. I'll always have a soft spot in my heart for *Knights Of The Old Republic*."

Whether you choose the Light side or the Dark, *Knights Of The Old Republic* remains a hell of an adventure, full of beautiful worlds, brave heroes, dastardly villains and heart-breaking betrayal. "Our goal was always to deliver a great game," smiles Greg Zeschuk. "And sometimes that takes a little longer than expected. But if you do something amazing in the end, it's always worth it." ✱

World of Warcraft

For over 15 years, World Of Warcraft has been home not only to the eternal clash between orcs and humans, but also to new alliances, virtual relationships, a digital virus wiping out servers and, of course, Leeroy Jenkins. We explore one of the most important games of the Noughties

WORDS BY ADAM BARNES

Kevin Jordan
Kevin was one of the designers of *WOW* who started work on the project in its early days.

"There are 10 million people in the *World Of Warcraft*, because Chuck Norris allows them to live." So goes the iconic advert that came alongside the success of *World Of Warcraft*, and Chuck Norris wasn't the only famous face giving the game their stamp of approval. Ozzy Osbourne, Mr T, Aubrey Plaza, Verne Troyer and William Shatner are just some of the celebrities that put their names – and likenesses – to Blizzard's MMO, and those are just the ones that featured in the ads. Vin Diesel, Ronda Rousey, Mila Kunis, Robin Williams and Jamie Lee Curtis have all vouched for the time they've lost in Azeroth. Matt Stone and Trey Parker loved it so much they made an episode of *South Park* devoted to it. There's no muted way to put it: *World Of Warcraft* is a phenomenon. It has the broad appeal that only a handful of games have been able to achieve, and the cultural significance within and without the games industry that arguably no game has had before or since. But what's more, though the game launched over 15 years ago, *WOW* is still an active and incredibly popular game, even now. It's one of those increasingly rare classics that permeates society so deeply that even non-gamers will know what you mean when you say, 'I play *World Of Warcraft*.' But there was a time, as hard as it may be to remember, when the concept wasn't so recognisable.

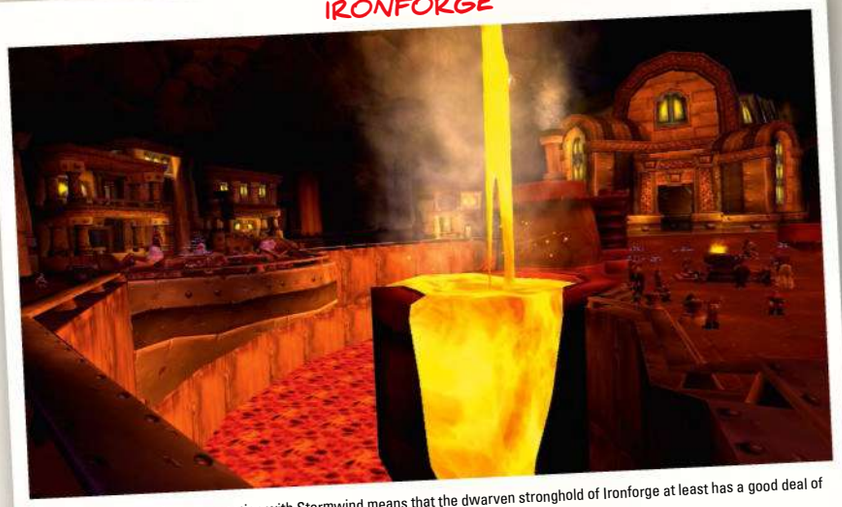
Towards the end of the second millennium and coming off the back of *Warcraft*, *StarCraft* and *Diablo*, Blizzard had a luxury that not many developers of the era had: it had time to fail. There was a game in the works behind the scenes at the studio known as 'Project Nomad', a top-down action RPG-like game that would allow players to switch between three active characters from a very long list, each with their own distinct and varied playstyles. "The project didn't really go anywhere," says Kevin Beardslee, who was working on Project Nomad for its short life. "For a while I got pulled off to work on *StarCraft: Brood War*, so I helped finish that up before going back to this project that wasn't going anywhere." This, combined with the release of and subsequent enjoyment of *EverQuest*, led Kevin to believe that the burgeoning MMO genre was an avenue that the company should be heading down. Even if the game amounted to little more than '*EverQuest* done Blizzard-style', it would likely still be another winner to add to the studio's already stellar reputation. Beardslee pitched it to the relevant person until it was carried up the chain of command; within the space of a week, Project Nomad was cancelled and development on an MMO began. "I actually pitched *World Of Warcraft* or *StarCraft*," adds Beardslee, who wanted to leverage a Blizzard IP but didn't really mind which one.

"I worked in tech support," explains Kevin Jordan, one of the designers that would join the *WOW* team early on. "I answered phones, I did some online support emails: you know, that kind of thing." Jordan remembers the team that was working on Project Nomad came to speak with each of the departments within Blizzard to discuss a potential new project. "They sort of had this chat and were saying, 'We're going to stop development on what we're working on, we're going to make an MMO,' and they sort of pinged everyone and what they felt would be better,

THUNDER BLUFF

The cow-like Tauren people have it good because their starting zone of Mulgore and city of Thunder Bluff are gorgeous places to be – they're overlooked because of the disinterest in the race, though.

IRONFORGE



An underground railway connection with Stormwind means that the dwarven stronghold of Ironforge at least has a good deal of footfall from Alliance players.

WORLD OF WARCRAFT

THEN AND NOW

16 YEARS IS A LONG TIME... BUT WHAT HAS CHANGED?

CHARACTERS

THEN

NOW

As the years have rolled on, Blizzard has been all too ready to make big changes to the key characters of the game – and actually this has been to its benefit. Yes, it has meant that beloved and long-lasting characters have been killed off from time to time, but it has also given room for others to grow and become more prominent. Young prince Anduin is a prime example of this, as the forgettable child NPC in Stormwind is now a prominent character; his own personal growth into an adult has been a significant topic of each new expansion pack, perhaps mirroring the game's own audience?

GRAPHICS

THEN

NOW

While there was only one instance (so far) of *WOW* getting a graphical overhaul when *Cataclysm* released, with each new expansion pack the artists at Blizzard get better and better at fine-tuning and honing the visual flair of the game. Not too long ago, the character models were reworked, too, and it brought a whole new level of quality to the game. However, that semi-cartoon, exaggerated look to *WOW*'s art style has never gone away, and that has only helped to keep Azeroth looking familiar.

COMBAT

THEN

NOW

The part of the game that perhaps changes the most often is the gameplay, since with each new expansion pack a big change is often thrown into the mix to keep things feeling fresh. However, while it's true that Blizzard has made great steps towards making every class feel viable in all its specialisations, nowadays there's a greater identity to each class and its specialisation than there ever was in vanilla *WOW*. As distinct as they were originally, some classes were just a chore to play in certain specs.

AREAS

THEN

NOW

Aside from the obvious graphical improvements that have been made over the years, perhaps the aspect that Blizzard has learnt the most in is in the way players progress through the game. The breadcrumb trail of quests now more effectively guides players around each new area to ensure they don't miss anything – which was a very real problem before. Vanilla *WOW* arguably felt more like a world since it was necessary to explore everything on foot to find every quest, but it was hard work finding your way around.

a fantasy MMORPG based on *Warcraft* or a sci-fi MMO based on *StarCraft*. It was probably 80% or 90% of people that said they wanted a fantasy MMO." Kevin Jordan, who was a diehard MMO player since *Ultima Online*, made strides to speak to the relevant people so that his interest in the growing genre could help the project.

The amount that *World Of Warcraft* owes to *EverQuest* isn't big news, but it only acted as a foundation for what Blizzard wanted to achieve. As has historically been the case, Blizzard wanted to use its unique ability to take a popular yet complex concept and open it up to a broader audience. A large part of doing so meant adapting the frustrations that *EverQuest* had built over the course of its life. "The biggest thing that I pitched was instanced dungeons," says Beardslee, referring to the engine's ability to create personal sessions for a dungeon based on each group accessing it, rather than *EverQuest*'s method which meant that players were often left unable to take on a boss since they were always waiting for the server reset. "I made the analogy of getting let into Disneyland and trying to run to whatever your favourite ride is and someone saying, 'Nope, sorry, someone already rode it – ride some other ride.' Everyone wants to try the encounters and bosses, and they shouldn't be limited just by the fact that it's not available." This wasn't the only concept that Beardslee had hoped to improve upon, however, with WASD-based movement rather than mouse control, better questing with more visible quest givers and a 'rested' EXP state that enabled time-strapped players to catch up with friends who can play more often than them being just some of the suggestions that the developer included in his pitch. The fact that it was a Blizzard game meant there was also going to be a bigger focus on the visuals of the game, too, as well as a much more involving and interesting storyline.

[PC] Outside of questing and killing, there are more relaxed pastimes like fishing, cooking or any one of the many professions.

THE BARRENS

This zone is like a big old nostalgia blanket for *World Of Warcraft* players. Whether it's talk of Mankirk's wife or the regular Alliance raids, it's perhaps the MMO's most iconic area.

Navigating longer distances requires using flight paths via griffons (Alliance) or duskbats (Horde). It takes time, but the bird's-eye view offers a glimpse of zones to come.

The team began development by splitting each day into two: the first half was just sat at the couches chatting about design decisions, while the second half was building the world itself. When it came to the latter, Blizzard began with just one zone, which it built, tested and refined to ensure the core gameplay loop was working perfectly. This first zone would become Elwynn Forest, the human starting area, and from there it would go on to define how the rest of Azeroth would look, feel, play and act. But Azeroth was going to be a big place, there needed to be more hands on deck. "They got us to do a map test," says Bo Bell, one of the QA members that was given a task to appraise their ability to design a level. This process was to find out who in the other departments of the studio had what it took to create a compelling an interesting world. "Something like 47 people turned in a map," adds Bo. "Initially there was only one position available, but they were blown away by all the submissions. The team wasn't quite sure what they were looking for, because the entire concept was completely fresh ground for them."

Initially, the engine was built on a tweaked version of the *Warcraft III* engine, the idea being that the two teams could just share the assets. Quite quickly *WOW* grew beyond this scope, however, and the engine became all its own thing, able to handle a closer, third-person perspective. Because of this increased scale, there was a necessary on-the-fly approach to development. If a spider-infested forest was needed, Bo suggests, then it was requested and the art team would go on to make it, an ad hoc process that simply wouldn't work in game development these days. "I tell people that that's how we did things," he adds, "and they look at me like we were insane, they're like: 'You don't have time to stop and do stuff like that.' I always say, 'I know but everyone was passionate and everyone wanted this awesome product.'"

This natural growth of a world continued over the course of the game's development, and with Chris Metzen finessing every aspect of the game's lore to really build upon the stories told in the RTS *Warcraft* games, Azeroth itself became a key part of why *WOW* was so iconic. Any *WOW* player will be able to recall fond memories of particular quests or iconic zones, and everyone certainly had their favourites: some might warmly recall racing naked through the Wetlands at too low a level just to join their Night Elf friend on a quest, others will remember the inane chat of The Barrens or the repeated Alliance raids, while everyone will remember teaming up for their first Elite kill – Hogger. Regardless of what that memory is, there's one thing that ties it all together: the community. "On the social side, I wanted to be sure there were lots of things players could do for each other," says Kevin Jordan, who was focused more on the design of the combat and the gameplay side of things. "You know, the simple buffs and the cures and things that you could do while you're passing someone. Because it was no skin off your back and it had the potential to be a friendly gesture that could spark a conversation, right?" The sound of Arcane Intelligent is a familiar one, since Mages would cast it on any player that they came across in the world.

TOP OF THE CLASS

A GUIDE TO WORLD OF WARCRAFT'S ORIGINAL CLASSES

WARRIOR

As the basic melee character, Warriors can either deal damage or take it. They're best suited as tanks, however, and except for those irritating moments when a player charges in to steal your quest enemy, are often the most in-demand class when it comes to co-op play.

PALADIN

In classic *WOW*, the Paladin is exclusive to the Alliance and combined tankiness with healing. In solo levelling it is an abomination to play since it is so slow and uninteresting, but a free mount, useful auras for raiding and the ability to make yourself immune to damage and then simply Hearthstone away certainly made up for all of the hassle.

HUNTER

As one of two classes capable of using companions, the Hunter is actually a very safe choice in pretty much any aspect of the game. It's also one of the best solo levelling classes since a Hunter's pet can tank mobs while they safely deal damage from a distance. The traps, too, are great in both player-versus-player and raiding.

ROGUE

Arguably the best damage dealers in the game, a good Rogue player is invaluable to any raid, dungeon or PVP match. Its stealth skills make it one of the more fun classes to play, too, since it is able to approach situations in a way that few other classes in the game can.

» [PC] Vanilla *World Of Warcraft* was not quite as easy as it is today, and you could easily spend a lot of time running back to your corpse.

» [PC] It's possible to 'try on' items that were linked in chat, a smart move that gives players something to work towards.

Priests had Fortitude, Druids had Mark Of The Wild, Paladins had Blessing Of Kings; but it was all designed to foster a little bit of social interaction. "Another thing was that we had this concept of communal areas. So, instances required five people but out in front of the dungeon area was a lot of non-elite content that you can do solo and quests will point you there. It would be this kind of thing where people were frequently bumping into each other and this would seamlessly transition people into getting into a group."

World Of Warcraft became a behemoth team for Blizzard, with over 60 people working on it – at the time that was an exceptional amount – and chipping away at making it the best it could be. There were designers for every part of the game, and since the game was so huge it needed the manpower. But despite moments during alpha where the team itself were getting excited, there were still doubts over *WOW*'s potential. "It was like, we knew we were good," says Bo, "we knew that we were making an awesome game, but we were still like… this might not sell real well, this may not be this awesome thing we think it is." Despite the excitement surrounding the game, the devs didn't truly know what they had on their hands until the open beta test. "The number of people that came in during the open beta, we were blown away. Everybody was talking about it, everybody wanted to get in on the *WOW* beta and at that point I knew we were going to blow *EQ* away."

And, of course, this was just a taster for things to come. The open beta didn't just prove there was a demand to Blizzard, it reinforced the hype that was building around *WOW*. There was a tangible excitement about its release, and gamers – MMO fans, *EverQuest* players and everyone in between – was eager to play when it launched in November 2004. And despite this hype, Blizzard was not prepared. "Our goal was 325,000 units," says Beardslee of the humble expectations for the game, "if we could sell that from November to the end of the year, then we felt like we were would be doing really well. We basically would have more than half of *EverQuest*'s userbase, and we did that. And then it doubled and doubled." The improvements it made to the *EQ* template were noticed, and players around the globe became absorbed by what was being termed 'The World Of Warcrack'. It ate up lives and players became devoted to their guilds, their levelling friends and their online avatars. All the while, Blizzard was struggling to keep up: "The biggest hurdle was that we didn't realise the concurrency of the number of players," says Beardslee, who recalls the queues that players had to endure just to play. "We had a bunch of numbers so we could figure out what a server could accommodate. We thought maybe people would get on and play for one to two hours a night but people were playing four to six hours every night and the same people were playing every single night."

The popularity didn't stop there, either. While more and more content was brought into the game after its launch with core features like player-versus-player or additional endgame content being added, in many ways Blizzard had to spend its time putting out fires, balancing the game, giving its voracious community additional things to do and ultimately maintaining its booming popularity. Despite launching just over two years after the vanilla release, the first expansion pack, *The Burning Crusade,* struck at a time when excitement for *WOW* was at its highest. It brought with it flying mounts, two new playable races and a chance to explore the original orc homeland of Outland. *The Wrath Of The Lich King* followed only a year later, tying off the beloved story of *Warcraft III*. This is widely considered to be the pinnacle of *World*

STORMWIND

The de facto capital of the Alliance, Stormwind is the Human city, and by and large your run-of-the-mill fantasy castle settlement. It isn't the easiest to navigate, but the sheer number of players picking the human race means it's number one.

of Warcraft

Shaman

These masters of the elements are restricted to the Horde and are very valuable additions to any team. They can heal, they can deal damage and they can even help to tank damage in a pinch. By leveraging deployable totems, Shaman play is more about kiting the enemy to a specific area, and players will get a good deal of self-sustain while doing so.

Mage

Commonly referred to as the 'glass cannon' of the game, the Mage class is capable of pumping out some serious damage, which makes them desirable teammates. If player-versus-player is more your scene, then the Frost skill tree is going to be essential.

Priest

Obviously the primary healing class of the game, Priests are actually the only class in the game with two healing specialisations. The damage-focused Shadow Priest is severely lacking, but play as a healing Priest and you'll be guaranteed a slot in any dungeon or raid group, so long as you don't let those wipes happen...

Druid

The ability to shapeshift into different animal forms – and through that fulfil any role in the game – makes the Druid a very tantalising class since it's such a cool concept. The problem is, however, that the Druid is the epitome of the jack-of-all-classes; fun to play, perhaps, but not in demand at all.

Warlock

Where the Mage is about high-damage spells with long cast timers, the Warlock is more about stacking numerous damage-over-time curses to whittle away at the enemy. Their damage is among the highest in the game, but it's arguably their Soulstone ability – which allows a group's tank or healer to resurrect themselves in battle – that makes them so popular.

Darnassus

Despite its gorgeous, nature-inspired design and relatively easy-to-navigate layout, the elven capital of Darnassus is shoved off in the corner of the world and, as a result, is mostly abandoned.

Orgrimmar

The Horde doesn't get quite as much choice when it comes to the cities that players would choose to call home, making the orc capital of Orgrimmar the go-to city destination. Its inventive design, built into the rocky environment of Durotar, make it a fun place to be.

Of Warcraft, which resulted in the game's height of subscribers at over 12 million by the end of the expansion's life. In December of 2010 *Cataclysm* was released, forever changing Azeroth by having the slumbering dragon Deathwing lay waste to the original world map. This allowed Blizzard to overhaul the graphics, but also to streamline the levelling experience in the process; it was a bold move, and a well-liked one, but many will say it was the death knell for the MMO. Since then the total number of subscribers has dropped and never quite recovered, with the *Mists Of Pandaria* expansion pack acting as a sort of nail in the coffin: though the expansion pack was well-designed, the shift in style and tone left many considered about the direction the series was beginning to take. *Warlords Of Draenor* (2014) rectified that by reigniting the Alliance and Horde war, while *Legion* (2016) felt like it was trying to encapsulate the same feelings that players had when they first played *The Burning Crusade*. *Battle For Azeroth* (2018) proved Blizzard's consistency when it comes to *Warcraft* content, and it sold 3.4 million copies on its first day alone – the fastest selling *WOW* expansion pack of all time. The most recent expansion, *Shadowlands*, marks a new chapter for the MMO, as well as an overhauled levelling system, but player dissatisfaction has led the userbase to seek out new MMOs to play, like *Final Fantasy XIV*.

Perhaps the most exciting thing that Blizzard has done is release of *World Of Warcraft: Classic*. After popular demand, the studio re-released the 'vanilla' *WOW*, warts and all, for players to get wistful over. "I think it's good to release *Classic*," says Kevin Jordan, "because there aren't a lot of high-quality games out there that provide the experience that vanilla *WOW* provided. A lot of MMOs, *WOW* included, have gone to a more streamlined approach and they don't cater this much to the social environments. I think it has potential to be very successful again." In a sort of ironic twist of fate, *Classic* was met with long server queues as Blizzard underestimated player interest. The developer was a little quicker to respond than before, but perhaps it says something of the love that players still have for vanilla *World Of Warcraft*.

Undercity

Buried beneath the once-great human city of Lordaeron, the novel concept of the Undercity is important because of its lore. It's a disaster to navigate, however, meaning most undead hop the nearest Zeppelin to Orgrimmar.

RPG History

2010s

As modern computing reached a certain plateau in terms of visuals, RPGs looked for other ways to draw players in...

By Adam Barnes

A lot changed within the games industry between the start of the Tens and its end. Things were coming to a close with the PS3 and the Xbox 360, and the era of gritty storylines and even grittier visuals was finally coming to an end. But the graphical capabilities of the console hardware that would replace them was not the same significant step up that we had seen with previous generations, meaning that the visuals would look better but - for the first time in gaming's history - there was no technological *innovation* that was being introduced with the new consoles. That meant the games themselves had to do things differently, and that's what this decade was about for role-playing games.

On one side, many RPG developers took this as an opportunity to build bigger, richer worlds and cram them full of detailed lore, storylines and characters. The likes of *The Witcher* rose to popularity through this approach, with graphics that knocked everyone on the floor and a deep, lore-riddled fantasy world that drew players in. *Mass Effect* continued to improve in this vein too, while newcomer *Dark Souls* handled its story and lore with subtlety, vagueness and hidden detail. The latter was an especially important release and is easily the most defining RPG release of the decade.

Elsewhere, Kickstarter rose to popularity early on in the decade and through this, reams of beloved franchises had their chance to rediscover glory as hundreds of projects were successfully funded through nostalgia alone. *Pillars Of Eternity* created a new wave of *Baldur's Gate*-esque RPGs, Interplay's *Wasteland* was revived and *Divinity: Original Sin* got to find success based on the promise of a return to 'classic' RPG gaming.

Alongside this was a resurgence in indie game development, the perfect antidote to the big-budget blockbusters that weren't always sustainable to develop in the RPG market. The new opportunities for indie developers to find success meant a number of important RPGs could find their way to market that simply wouldn't have existed otherwise. The likes of *Hades*, *Disco Elysium* and *Undertale* would never have been released under the previous decade's restrictive publisher-developer contracts that were the norm. This meant innovation was possible at every corner, and things are only just getting started...

GAMES THAT DEFINED THE DECADE

2010
Mass Effect 2

Mass Effect laid the foundation so that its sequel could improve on practically every aspect of the original. Of the trilogy, the second game is considered to be the best, and it's easy to see why: the perfect balance between action and RPG-driven exploration, a unique sci-fi world to explore, a cast of charismatic characters and just a much higher level of polish and shine that was arguably missing in the original.

2011
Bastion

Developer Supergiant Games is these days one of the more recognisable indie studios, and its latest release *Hades* is the pinnacle of its work. However, its debut release of *Bastion* on Xbox Live proved that this was always going to be a developer to pay attention to, with the game partnering slick RPG combat to a unique narrative system that would narrate your actions as you made them.

2011
Dark Souls

Though its predecessor, *Demon's Souls*, was released in the decade prior, it wasn't until *Dark Souls* that the series really took off. The unique RPG found fame with its tough but fair difficulty, rich lore-filled world and captivating boss fights. It was such an important release that it even coined the term '*Souls*-like' to define any new RPG that was released in a similar vein - of which there were many.

2011
The Elder Scrolls V: Skyrim

The hype following *Oblivion* meant that *Skyrim* was always going to be a winner, but it managed to reach untold levels of popularity having been released on practically every platform there is – remastered and modded and still being played to this day. It encapsulated the *Elder Scrolls* RPG experience perfectly with a setting that just seemed to stick with players around the world.

2012
Borderlands 2

The original *Borderlands* debuted to great success thanks to its unique approach, which combined loot-based RPG gameplay from the likes of *Diablo* with a stylised FPS look. The sequel was the considerably better game, however, which really managed to nail the tone of the world, its humour and its compelling gun-and-loot gameplay. Handsome Jack is still one of the greatest villains you can encounter.

2013
Final Fantasy XIV: A Realm Reborn

The original release of this MMORPG was considered to be a failure, to such a point that its developers took a step back and reworked everything. In the years since, *FFXIV* has gone on to become one of the most revered and popular MMOs being played at the moment and continues to receive highly awaited content patches and expansion packs. It's the redemption tale of the decade.

2015
The Witcher III: Wild Hunt

While it was the second game that boosted *The Witcher* franchise into superstardom, the highly anticipated release of *Wild Hunt* left no one disappointed. Its vast open world, rich story and highly immersive combat make for a truly solid RPG, but it's the character of Geralt Of Rivia and the incredibly high detail of the world that really draw players into the game.

2015
Undertale

To look at it, no one would have expected much from *Undertale*, but it managed to garner a great deal of notoriety for its unique approach to role-playing mechanics. This time around, you could beat enemies by making friends, not just attacking. On top of this was a heartfelt storyline, a lot of laughs and the fact that it is both nostalgically familiar and yet completely and utterly novel.

2016
Persona 5

While not obscure by any stretch, the *Persona* series of Japanese RPGs has been something of a slow burner. By the time the fifth instalment was released, however, the developer knew what worked and created a masterpiece. It is the best the series has to offer with its social simulation gameplay, deep RPG combat and iconic visual style - but it's also one of the greatest RPGs ever released.

2017
Divinity: Original Sin II

This crowdfunded series from Larian was built on the promise of something akin to the classic PC RPGs of old, and while that was true, it still managed to feel fresh and new all at the same time. The sequel was a complete refining of the original *Divinity* and brought with it a level of quality, depth and compulsion that makes it one of the best 'true' RPGs of the decade.

Future Classic

Modern games you'll still be playing in years to come

Info

- **Featured System:** PC
- **Year:** 2015
- **Publisher/Developer:** CD Projekt Red
- **Key People:** Konrad Tomaszkiewicz, Marcin Blacha, Mateusz Kanik

Go Deeper

- Geralt's beard grows in real time, meaning you'll have to check in at the barbers every now and again if you want to keep your hero clean shaven.
- An ice skating combat mode was tested for the game, but was ultimately dropped. Probably for the best.

» [PS4] Geralt enjoys a fiery sunset before heading off in search for his missing ward.

THE WITCHER III: WILD HUNT

How CD Projekt Red found its feet on its third attempt at making an RPG that would stand side by side with genre titans, and how it managed to surpass that goal and made a game that's nothing short of a classic

Words by Paul Walker-Emig

THE BACKGROUND

The mutant monster-slaying hero that we now know as the protagonist of *The Witcher* series, Geralt Of Rivia, was created by the Polish writer Andrzej Sapkowski. His countrymen at CD Projekt Red's first attempt at a videogame adaptation of Sapkowski's *Witcher* novels was released in 2007 and was followed by *The Witcher II: Assassins Of Kings* in 2011. You can find many of the elements that would eventually make the third game in the series a monster hit in both titles, but neither found the right formula. It's not that the games were terribly received, but they were not universally praised and certainly not up to the level the studio would come to reach in terms of storytelling, technical sophistication or polish, as it did with the third entry.

When it came to developing *The Witcher III*, CDPR went all in, taking the lessons from making the first two games and backing its new title with a bigger budget that reflected an increase in ambition. In the lead up to release, the studio was making the kind of bold claims that the videogame marketing machine generates for new titles, but it turned out the studio wasn't bluffing.

THE GAME

The Witcher III is an epic tale about Geralt's quest to track down his missing adopted daughter, Ciri, and save her from a mysterious, mythical force called the Wild Hunt. Using Geralt's two swords – a steel one for normal enemies and a silver blade for slaying monsters – in combination with magical abilities granted to him by virtue of his Witcher training, you battle your way across the land, completing quests for the many characters you meet on the way and upgrading Geralt's equipment and abilities as you go. The epic nature of the game's tale is reflected in the gob-smacking scale of its world. You begin the game in an area called White Orchard and inevitably make the mistake of thinking it's pretty big. Then you realise it's basically the tutorial area. A speck of dust on a colossal map that stretches from the swamps and forests of Velen, to the bustling cobbled streets of the northern city of Novigrad, to the haggard, windswept Skellige isles. Traversing these varied regions on your trusty steed, Roach, is a pleasure. You'll witness glorious sunsets as you trot down winding mountain

» [Xbox One] Geralt has a dance-like fighting style that encourages you to pirouette out of the way of attacks and swing your sword with precise timing.

» [Xbox One] You'll start to learn what creatures to expect in what locales. Drowners, for example, are often found by water.

Things of note

TOUGH CHOICES

The Witcher III is filled with choices that change how stories play out. Often, the consequences of your actions aren't revealed until long after the fact, to great effect.

MORAL COMPLEXITY

The game tries to reflect the messy complexity of real life in its storylines, rather than taking simple black and white moral positions.

COMPELLING QUESTS

The carefully designed quests and compelling stories that accompany them are one of the keys to the game's success, and will keep you playing for ages.

A STRONG HAND

The *Witcher III*'s strategic in-game card game, Gwent, was so popular with fans that it's now got its own spin-off. The standalone game expands on the minigame's ruleset and strategies.

SOUND OF SUCCESS

Accomplished voice acting and a fantastic soundtrack, performed by the Brandenburg State Orchestra, add a great deal to the overall experience.

> **"The game does a fantastic job of building up to the boss encounters"**

paths, see dramatic grey skies while stalking wild, witch-infested woods, the forests thick fauna swaying in icy wind and thunderous rain.

Of course, scale and visual flare is not enough to make a true classic. *The Witcher III* shines in the detail that fills its vast spaces. What makes its wild lands a pleasure to explore, alongside the game's beauty, is the adventure you find there. The rich tales of spooks haunting the ruins told by terrified villagers, the chance encounters with an intriguing new character that drag you off on unexpected paths and make you forget where you were heading in the first place. *The Witcher III* is filled with these tantalising threads for those inclined to pull on them and they'll always unravel to reveal something worthwhile.

At the core of all of this is the stories. No quest in this game is an afterthought. Each one has a tale attached that makes it interesting to follow. They'll be informed by real-life folklore, function as psychological fables, tie into people's personal problems and reveal complex relationships, give you pause to think about how events like war impact on those at the bottom of the social ladder. This means that you never feel like you're doing a fetch quest; you are following a story to its conclusion instead.

Finally, there are the monster hunts. The game does a fantastic job of building up to these de facto boss encounters, requiring you to draw on all of the game's RPG systems to be successful. You often have to do a bit of detective work to get information on the monster, scouring an area with Geralt's Witcher senses to track the beast or talking to NPCs for information. You can brew healing potions and oils, specialised for your chosen target, to apply to your sword using the plants you've gathered. Then, when you finally confront your foe, you have to use the parries, dodges and magic 'Signs' you've been mastering throughout the course of the game to outmanoeuvre your enemy and take it down with your blade. The slow build that leads to the battle only makes it more satisfying when you finally vanquish a fearsome Griffin or a grotesque Necrophage and take their head as your trophy.

WHY IT'S A FUTURE CLASSIC

RPGs are often associated with numbers – chasing experience points to unlock new skills and become more powerful, playing with equipment sets to balance power and speed, collecting the number of items you need to craft an item or brew a potion, and so on. You can find all of that in this game, too. However, *The Witcher III* never forgets that RPGs aren't just about numbers. They are about adventure. In crafting a world full stunning locations, engaging characters and carefully crafted stories, *The Witcher III* makes you forget about the numbers. You're not taking contracts on monsters or veering off the beaten path to investigate something that's caught your eye to chase the next level-up, or because you'll get a bit of treasure at the end of it (though you will get that too). You're doing it for sheer thrill of the adventure itself. You're doing it for the stories. That is what ensures that *The Witcher III* will be remembered as one of the genre's defining games. ✱

» [PS4] The variety of environments invites your jaw to fall onto the floor.

Future Classic

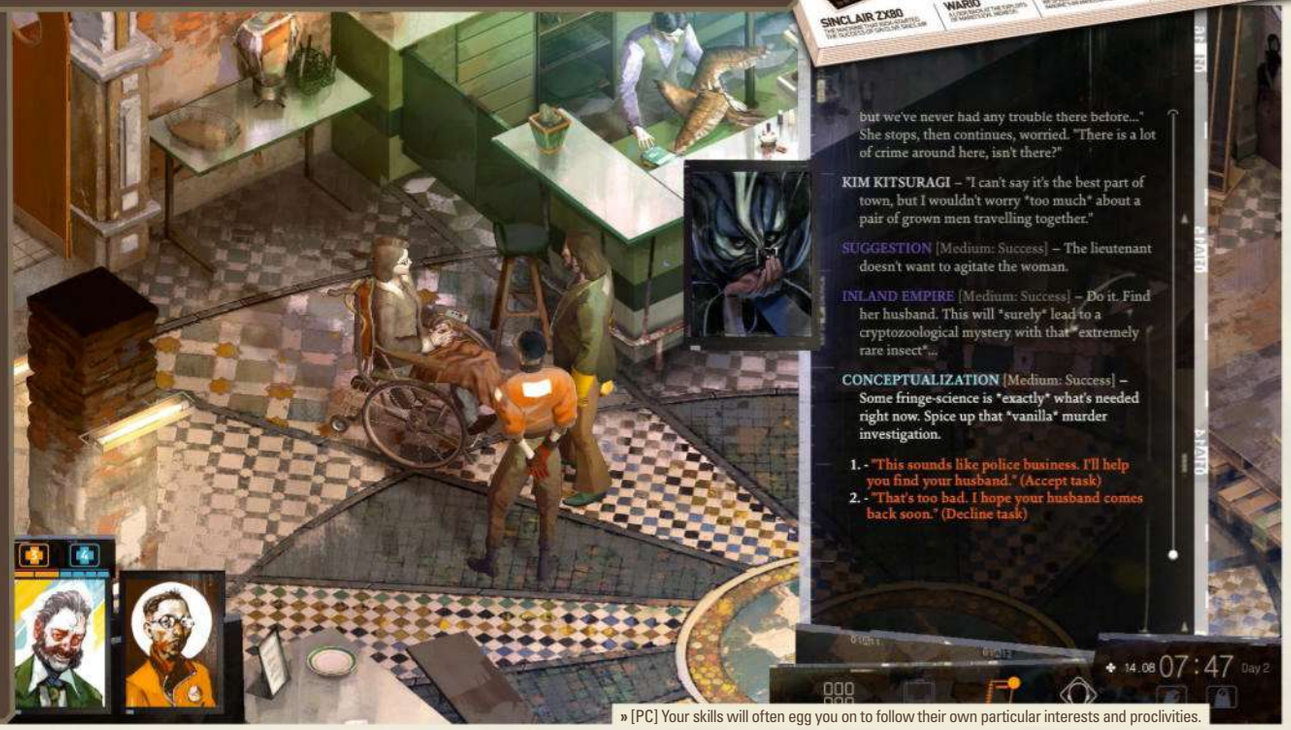
Modern games you'll still be playing in years to come

Info

- **Featured System:** PC
- **Year:** 2019
- **Developer:** ZA/UM
- **Key People:** Robert Kurvitz, Aleksander Rostov

Go Deeper

- *Disco Elysium* was originally developed under the title *No Truce With The Furies* until a name change in 2018. We think they're both pretty cool names, to be honest.
- *Disco Elysium* began life as a tabletop RPG campaign being put together by developer ZA/UM. It was only later that it evolved to become a videogame.


but we've never had any trouble there before..." She stops, then continues, worried. "There is a lot of crime around here, isn't there?"
KIM KITSURAGI – "I can't say it's the best part of town, but I wouldn't worry *too much* about a pair of grown men travelling together."
SUGGESTION [Medium: Success] – The lieutenant doesn't want to agitate the woman.
INLAND EMPIRE [Medium: Success] – Do it. Find her husband. This will *surely* lead to a cryptozoological mystery with that *extremely rare insect*...
CONCEPTUALIZATION [Medium: Success] – Some fringe-science is *exactly* what's needed right now. Spice up that *vanilla* murder investigation.
1. - "This sounds like police business. I'll help you find your husband." (Accept task)
2. - "That's too bad. I hope your husband comes back soon." (Decline task)
14.08 07:47 Day 2

» [PC] Your skills will often egg you on to follow their own particular interests and proclivities.

Why this surreal detective RPG, packed full of innovative ideas, will go down in videogame history, not only as a fantastic game, but a revolutionary intervention into the genre

Words by Paul Walker-Emig

DISCO ELYSIUM

THE BACKGROUND

Development studio ZA/UM started as a relatively informal collective composed of artists, activists and writers playing around with *Dungeons & Dragons* campaigns, among other things, in 2009. Over time, ZA/UM solidified to become a game developer and the game that would become *Disco Elysium* was its first project. The studio had no previous reputation to build on, but the promise of a game that would echo the best of *Planescape: Torment* in its gameplay design (yes, that means no combat), in combination with a beautiful watercolour art style, at least won it some attention. When it was released, its quality was undeniable. Lavished with deserved critical praise, *Disco Elysium* became an RPG essential.

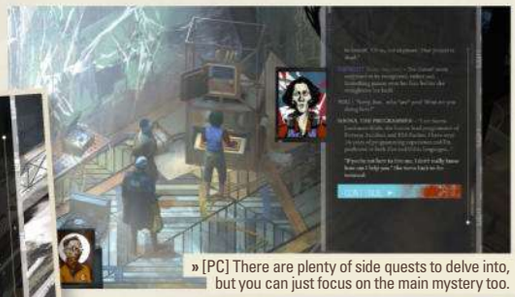
THE GAME

You play as a dishevelled detective coming off the back of a drink and drug bender who, despite an existential crises that has seen him forget everything about who is, has to get to grips with the issue of the man hanging from a tree outside the hostel he is staying at. You and your partner, Kim Kitsuragi, must solve this murder, primarily by heading out to interview the residents of the neglected district of Martinaise.

The way you go about doing this varies wildly depending on what kind of detective you build and how you invest skill points as you progress. Investing points in faculties like Logic and Visual Calculus will make you an intellectual detective able to make deductions about what happened at a scene and spot inconsistencies in testimony. Skills like Empathy and Inland Empire fall into the psychic category, making you able to pick up on how characters are feeling and be more sensitive to intuition. A high Perception skill will allow you to spot detail you would otherwise miss, Half-Life makes you better at intimidation, Shivers attunes you to the voice of the city, and so on.

The level of variety *Disco Elysium* is able to present thorough these skills and their different combinations is staggering. You'll find that investing a few experience points in a skill has the potential

» [PC] Your character's colleagues are on call to help out, but whether you think it would be a good idea to tell them you don't know what your name is any more is up to you.



» [PC] There are plenty of side quests to delve into, but you can just focus on the main mystery too.

» [PC] There are a few key ideologies in the world of *Disco Elysium*; you can align yourself with them, if you so choose.

» [PC] Out on the coastline you can meet the forgotten, disregarded and different.

Things of note

SKILLS

Disco Elysium's diverse set of skills let you shape your character's personality, along with their abilities. In fact, they are characters in their own right.

THOUGHT CABINET

This is a place where you can browse thoughts your protagonist has had. They usually offer some kind of stat buff when you're done contemplating them.

STRONG CHARACTERS

Disco Elysium's characters are fantastic. Some of them can seem like stereotypes at first, but you just don't know them well enough yet.

EMBRACING THE WEIRD

This game often takes an appealingly surreal tone. It's one you can lean into if you invest in the mystical and intuitive skills available.

PLAY DRESS UP

Every piece of clothing you wear comes with stat buffs and/or debuffs. You might look ridiculous, but playing dress up can make all the difference when you're trying to pass skill checks.

to completely change the way you experience the game and the city you are exploring – just one of the many compelling ways that *Disco Elysium* responds to player choice. What really makes *Disco Elysium*'s skill system special, however, is the fact that these skills all have a voice.

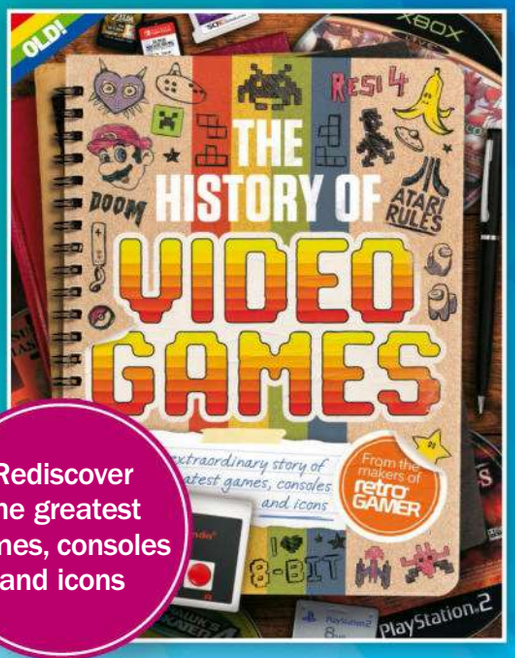
Imagine you're trying to pry some information out of another character. While your speaking, your skills will be popping up in your mind, offering their opinion on what's unfolding. Empathy might tell you that this particular character is upset about something, giving you a clue as to how you should proceed to get what you want. Invest more points in Empathy afterwards and it'll become a louder presence in your mind as you go forward. Invest *too* much and you might find that what was a useful skill starts to hinder your detective as he becomes overwhelmed with the emotional burden of picking up on everyone's feelings. Even if you don't push too far in one direction, you'll still have to deal with the fact that your skills will occasionally disagree on how you should handle a situation, creating a fascinating dynamic between the different parts of your detective's psyche.

This is all situated in a richly drawn world with a carefully thought out political history that offers a critical lens on the world that we live in. In the early going, it comes across as cynical and strange. To an extent, it still can be, if that's how you choose to play it. Give its characters time to grow, however, and you'll find something rich and complex that thinks carefully about how history and ideology inevitably shapes individuals and their lives. Having said that, none of this stops your tie talking to you now and again, so we suppose it is still pretty weird.

Even within the grand tradition of RPGs, this game, and its protagonist, are incredibly malleable, frequently responding to your choices in interesting ways. Taken in combination with the game's sophisticated worldbuilding, sharp political eye, unique mechanics and strong writing, it deserves every bit of praise it's got.

WHY IT'S A FUTURE CLASSIC

A game this good always has a chance of going down in history as a classic. *Disco Elysium*'s status is assured, however, by the influence it is sure to have on the RPGs we will be playing in the coming years. Its innovations in how skills become a part of your character and the degree to which they shape the way the world responds to you and the way that you interpret it, feel like a watershed for the genre. There's never been anything quite like it before, but, as is often the case when a game hits something new out of the park, there are bound to be games like it in the future. In decades to come, when we're casting our eye back over the history of RPGs and picking out those that have shaped its course, *Disco Elysium* will be one of those indelible reference points. That, above all, is what makes it a future classic.



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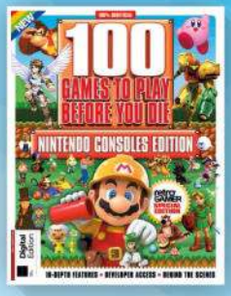

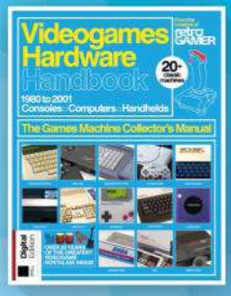

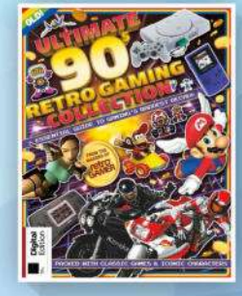

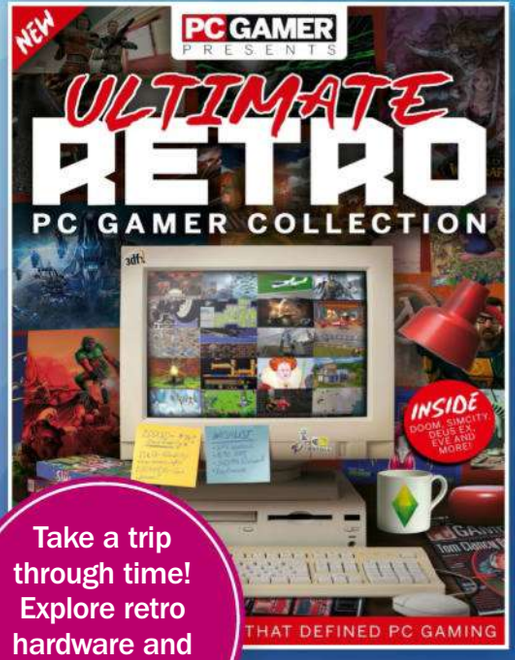

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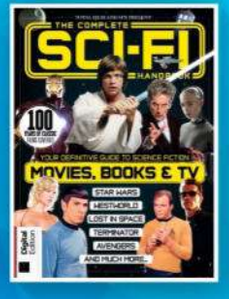

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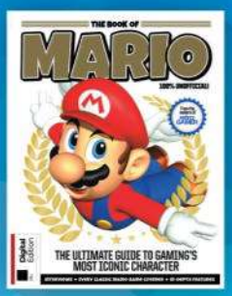

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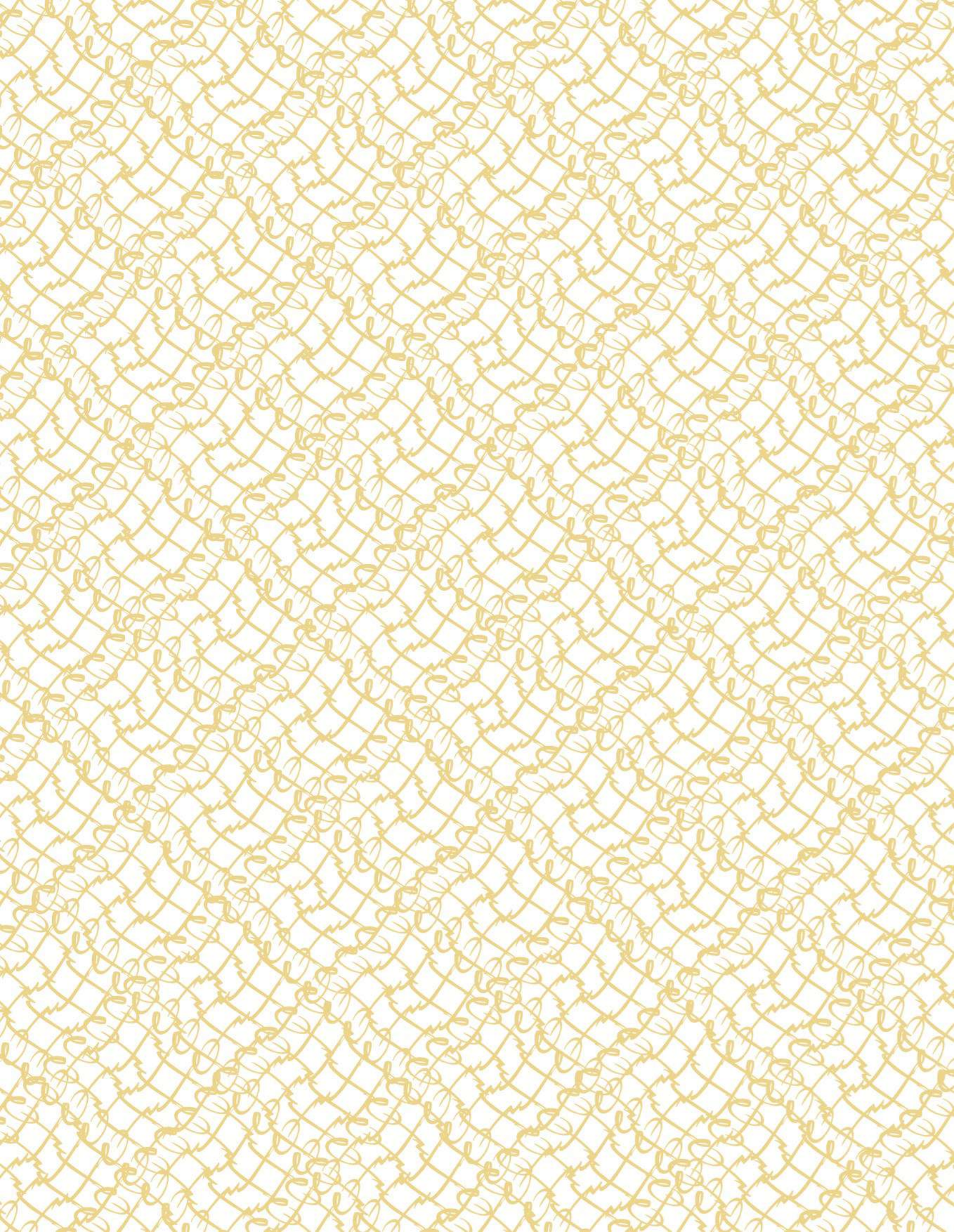

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